

WALKING WITH JESUS - PART 5
The Center of Attention
Dr. Derek Morris

Preaching passage:	Matthew 6:1-18
Subject:	When followers of Jesus give to the poor, pray or fast, who should be the center of attention
Complement:	God, not us.
Exegetical idea:	When followers of Jesus give to the poor, pray, or fast, God should be the center of attention, not us.
Homiletical idea:	When your Father in heaven is the center of attention, you will be blessed with heavenly blessings.
Purpose:	To encourage my hearers to make God the center of attention in their lives and in the witness.

Have you ever sat in a class where the teacher was just rambling on and on and on? You had no idea where the teacher was going and how the teacher was trying to get there? Jesus wasn't like that! Jesus was a Master Teacher. He wanted everyone to understand His teaching; at least, everyone whose heart was open to truth.

In the portion of the great sermon on the mount that we are going to study today, we will see another example of Jesus, the Master Teacher. In His opening statement at the beginning of Matthew chapter 6, Jesus gives a concise summary of the 17 verses that follow. In teaching, we call that deductive methodology. You state what you are going to talk about, and then you unpack that idea.

We are continuing our series on the great sermon of Jesus, the sermon on the Mount. We have entitled this series of messages, Walking with Jesus. Jesus began His great sermon with a collection of sayings to remind us that when you are part of the kingdom of heaven, you are blessed! Then, with the metaphors of salt and light, Jesus reminded us that He wants to use us to make a difference in the world! In the rest of Matthew chapter 5, Jesus gave us six

examples of the good works that will bring glory to our Father in heaven and challenged us to let our lives be a beautiful reflection of the character of our Father in heaven. If you missed any of those messages in this series on Walking with Jesus, you can watch them online at www.forestlakechurch.org.

And now Jesus, the Master Teacher, gives a summary statement of the next section of His great sermon on the mount. Please take your copy of His sermon and read with me from Matthew 6:1. “.....” There it is. Clear and simple. A summary statement of the 17 verses that follow. Let’s read it again. “.....”

We’ll discover as we continue our study that Jesus is not opposed to the “acts of righteousness” or “acts of devotion” that He now discusses. There is nothing inherently wrong with giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting. Jesus wants to talk to us today about how we do our acts of devotion. And as we study, remember the opening statement of the Master Teacher in Matthew 6:1.

Now let’s look at the first “act of devotion” that Jesus highlights in Matthew 6:2-4. Let’s read together. “.....” Jesus might have mentioned any act of service performed by a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Giving to the needy is just one example. And what lesson can we learn from these words of Jesus? Jesus says, “Don’t make a big deal about your act of service.” Did people really blow trumpets to attract attention to themselves when they gave to the poor? (Make the sound of a trumpet, and look around to make sure that everyone is noticing before you give something to an imaginary beggar). Did they really do that? I don’t know. But we still have this expression today: “he’s blowing his own trumpet! She’s blowing her own trumpet!” In other words, those people are drawing attention to

themselves. They want to be noticed. They want to be the center of attention. I can also see them now! (Act out giving to the needy in a way that draws attention to themselves).

When people give to the needy, when people perform acts of service with a desire to draw attention to themselves, do they receive any reward? What did Jesus say? Let's read the words of Jesus at the end of Matthew 6:2. "....." What is their reward? The attention that they are seeking.

How then should we act when we give to the needy, or perform any act of service in Jesus' name? Let's read again from Matthew 6:3-4. "....." Verse 3 is a hyperbole. An exaggeration. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing! (Act that out) There's nothing wrong with counseling together as a family about how God wants your family to get involved in an act of service. There's nothing wrong with a group of people working together to provide meals to disaster victims. That's not what Jesus is talking about here. What Jesus is saying is this: Don't try to draw attention to what you are doing.

A couple of weeks ago, Roger Anderson was filmed by some of the national television networks in connection with some disaster relief that members of our church were doing. Roger wasn't there looking for a television interview. He wasn't wandering around the disaster site saying, "Hello everyone! Notice me!" He was serving in Jesus name. And Jesus says, "Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you ."

Remember the opening words of Jesus, the Master Teacher. Matthew 6:1 "....." Do not give to draw attention to yourself. Do not do any act of service in Jesus' name to draw attention to yourself. Do it to bring glory to your Father in heaven. Let your Father in heaven be the center of attention!

Let's look at the second "act of devotion" mentioned by Jesus. Matthew 6, beginning with verse 5. Let's read together. "....." Can you believe that? These people deliberately prayed in places where people would notice them! Their goal was not to commune with God but to be noticed by people. Is there any reward when you pray like that? What is the reward? The attention that a person is seeking. Notice the words of Jesus at the end of Matthew 6:5. "....."

Let's read on. Matthew 6:6. "....." Is Jesus opposed to praying in public? What's the answer? No! How do we know that? Because Jesus prayed in public. Here are just a few examples. Write them down. John 11:41-42. John 17. Luke 23:34. There is nothing inherently wrong with praying in the presence of others. But Jesus is saying, "Don't pray to bring attention to yourself! Let's your prayers bring glory to your Father in heaven. Let your Father in heaven be the center of attention!"

My wife's grandmother was the daughter of a physician to the emperor of China. Her family lived near the Forbidden City in what is now called Beijing. The Feng family had become followers of Jesus and prayer was an important act of devotion in the Feng family. Even when she was older, living in the United States, Bodil's grandmother would pray in Chinese. According to grandpa, when grandma would pray in private, she would kowtow and blow kisses to Jesus. I find that a very beautiful expression of her love and devotion, based on her cultural heritage. But my wife never saw her grandma pray like that in public. You see, grandma didn't want to draw attention to herself. She wanted all of the attention to go to her Father in heaven. I'm so thankful for praying grandparents and praying parents, aren't you? Who knows where some of us would be if someone hadn't been praying for us? They were praying not to bring

attention to themselves. They were crying out to God. He was the center of their attention.

Let's read on. Matthew 6:7. "....." How does the King James Version of the Bible translate those words of Jesus? "Use not vain repetitions." The Greek verb used here, $\epsilon\upsilon\lambda\omicron\lambda\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\iota\tau\epsilon$, is only used this one place in the entire New Testament. That's always significant. We have to ask ourselves, "Why is this particular word used?" What is the significance of this particular word? $\epsilon\upsilon\lambda\omicron\lambda\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\iota\tau\epsilon$. Well, the noun \logos means "word" or "something said." The expression later in the verse may help to explain this word. It says, "....." Most scholars believe that this unique word $\epsilon\upsilon\lambda\omicron\lambda\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\iota\tau\epsilon$ conveys a meaning of babbling, speak without thinking, talking idly.

Is Jesus referring here to a meaningly babble that is not understand on earth or in heaven? Perhaps. Is He talking about a meaningless repetition of His name like some kind of Christian mantra: Oh Father, heavenly Father, we thank you, Father, for this day, heavenly Father. Or people who chant "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," over and over again. Perhaps. Is Jesus talking about the constant repetition of prayers, one after the other, like "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name," "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name," "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." Is Jesus talking about that meaningless repetition? Perhaps.

But remember the context for these words of Jesus is people who are seeking attention from others rather than making our Father in heaven the center of attention. Have you ever been talking to someone and they weren't really listening? They weren't paying attention. Maybe your husband says he's listening, but really he's watching the ball game or reading the newspaper. I know. I'm on dangerous ground here! And he talks back to you with grunts, or

brief comments like “uh huh,” and “yes, dear.” He’s making sounds but his mind is somewhere else. And when you challenge him with “What did I just say to you?” he looks kind of startled and hopefully says, “I’m sorry, I wasn’t really listening. Can you say that again?” Do you know what I’m talking about?

Perhaps it’s possible to pray like that too. Words are coming out, but the person isn’t really thinking about what is being said. His or her attention is somewhere else. And in the context of what Jesus is talking about, they’re probably wondering if others are noticing them! Speaking words without thinking. Just wanting to be the center of attention.

Jesus says, “Don’t pray like that.” Let’s read again the summary statement of the Master Teacher recorded in Matthew 6:1. “.....” Don’t pray to draw attention to yourself. Pray to bring glory to God. Let your Father in heaven be the center of attention.

Some people are a little confused by the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:8. Oh, the first part of the sentence is clear—“Do not be like them,” but what about the second half of the sentence? “For your Father knows what you need before you ask him” Is Jesus saying that it is wrong to ask for anything in prayer because our Father in heaven already knows what we need? Is that what Jesus is saying? No. In another place, Jesus says, “Ask and you will receive.” There is nothing wrong in asking. But you don’t need to ask Him over and over and over and over again. Don’t use pseudo prayer babble!

In the 5 verses that follow, Jesus gives us a model for prayer that is so important, so helpful as a guide for our prayer life, that I’m going to devote a whole message to that passage next week. Many Christians refer to this model prayer recorded in the great sermon on the mount as the Lord’s Prayer. Perhaps we should actually call it “The Disciples’ Prayer” or the

prayer that the Lord gave to His followers. We'll study this amazing model for prayer next week, and I hope you can join us.

But let's look now at the third act of devotion that Jesus highlights in this section of His great sermon on the mount. We've looked at giving to the needy, and with that we might add other acts of service, we've looked at prayer, and now, starting with Matthew 6:16, we're going to look at fasting.

Let's read together, from Matthew 6:16. (First part) "....."

What is the purpose of fasting anyway? Well, there are fasts that people go on to lose weight or to improve their health. There are fasts to make a political statement. We call that kind of fast ahunger strike. But a biblical fast described here is an abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. An abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. The purpose is to clear the mind and to focus on God, His Word and His will. Daniel went on a partial fast, as recorded in Dan 10:3. He still had a full-time job, so he couldn't abstain from food entirely. He ate simple food, limited variety, and perhaps limited quantity. Enough to provide strength for the demands of the day. A simple partial fast might be fruit, or whole wheat bread and water. Jesus gives us an example of a normal fast. No food to eat. Just water to drink. Esther gives us an example of an absolute fast in a time of emergency, crying out to God. No food. No water.

No one type of fast is more holy than another. Whether a partial fast, a normal fast, or an absolute fast, the purpose is the same—to clear the mind and to focus on God. And Jesus tells us, in Matthew 6:16, "....."

Is there any reward when you fast like that? What does Jesus say at the end of Matthew 6:16. "....." What is the reward that a person receives who is fasting in such a way

as to be noticed by others? What is their reward? The attention that they are seeking.

But Jesus says, “When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting.” Take a shower. Comb your hair. Look neat and tidy! Don’t draw attention to the fact that you are fasting.

Don’t fast to bring attention to yourself, Jesus says. How can you focus on God when you are preoccupied with what other people think about you? How can you be attentive to God when you are constantly looking around to see if anyone is noticing you? Jesus continues in Matthew 6:17-18, “.....”

Some weeks ago, my wife was impressed to fast and pray for a young lady who was in crisis. This young lady was hanging out with bad company, and her life was in a downward spiral. My wife didn’t walk about wearing a T-shirt which said, “Please notice me! I’m fasting today!” She mentioned to me that she would be fasting and praying for this young lady, but she didn’t say it like this: “I’m going to be fasting today so less holy people like you will have to fix your own food!” She didn’t act like that. She wanted God to be the center of attention, not her.

And do you know what happened. The very day that my wife was fasting and praying, that very day, that young woman’s boyfriend, who was very bad influence on her—he told her that he didn’t want to date her anymore. He dumped her. He told her that he didn’t want to hang out with her anymore. From a human perspective, I was hoping that she would dump him! That day, while my wife was fasting and praying for this young lady, Jesus carried her one more step on the road to freedom. Some one ought to say “Hallelujah” out there. Call upon me, the Lord says, and I will deliver you and you will glorify Me.”

I don’t share that story to bring attention to my wife. Rather I share that story to remind

you that God calls us to fasting and prayer. “When you fast,” Jesus says. Not if you fast. Not don’t fast. But when you fast. Just remember, when you do fast, don’t fast to bring attention to yourself. Let your Father in heaven be the center of attention!

What did Jesus, the Master Teacher, say at the beginning of this section of His great sermon on the mount. Let’s read again from Matthew 6:1. “.....” There’s a vital lesson contained in this message for each one of us. In all your acts of devotion, let your Father in heaven be the center of attention. When you are performing an act of service, whether giving an offering, or serving a meal at a disaster site, let your Father in heaven be the center of attention. When you are praying, whether in public or in private, let your Father in heaven be the center of attention. When you are fasting, whether for a day or a week, with simple food or no food at all, let your Father in heaven be the center of attention. Because when your Father in heaven is the center of attention, you will be blessed with heavenly blessings. Did you hear me? When your Father in heaven is the center of attention, you will be blessed with heavenly blessings!