

# The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### MATTHEW 6:1-18

WE now pass to that section of the Manifesto which deals with the relation of man to God.

The King first lays down a fundamental principle, negative in form, but positive in intention and result. That principle is expressed in the words, “**Take heed that ye do not your alms (righteousness) before men to be seen of them.**”

“Righteousness” includes alms, and prayer, and fasting, the three matters subsequently dealt with. When Jesus uttered that first word He said everything, and all that followed was illustrative of the application of this principle to life; three departments being selected which peculiarly reveal human relationship to God in the present and probationary condition.

The principle is first applied in the matter of the giving of alms; secondly in the matter of prayer; and, finally, in the matter of fasting; alms, prayer, and fasting, the three great means of grace; the first stated being the final one in the order of experience. Alms is the last thing; prayer precedes it; and fasting prepares for prayer. The statement moves backward from the external manifestation of Divine relationship, to the internal sources of power.

- The proof of human relationship to God in the world is the giving of alms.
- The power that creates the giving of alms is prayer.
- The condition that makes prayer powerful, is that of fasting.

These are the three great means of grace. There are others, external and smaller ones, which are merely sacramental symbols of the larger.

The means of grace and let us begin where the King finished are:

- First, fasting;
- Secondly, prayer;
- Thirdly, the giving of alms.

First, fasting the denial of everything that interferes with intimate, direct fellowship between the life and God. We may have our symbol of fasting if we like, in a day in which we eat no food; but that is by no means essential.

Fasting is a matter far deeper, far profounder. It is the life suffering the loss even of rights in order that it may come into more strenuous relationship with God. That is the deepest means of grace; and in proportion as we learn what fasting really means, we approach the infinite sources of power.

After that comes prayer; and to the fasting life this is delightful, natural, spontaneous. The highest outreaching of the life is only possible as it is free from sordidness, sensuality, and the dust of to-day; and thus can hold unhindered spiritual communion with God.

The result of such prayer will always be that we hurry from the secret place, to give; to pour out alms! The giving of alms is much more than the giving of money. We may have no money. We may honestly be unable to put anything in a collection plate; and yet we may be giving God the richest gifts, a service of sacrifice our blood, our life to help our brother.

The first words are fundamental. Let us begin there - **“Take heed!”**

That is a flaming sword, warning men off from holy ground. Do not let us play with fire, do not let us come to these statements imagining that we have found a soft and sentimental teaching. They constitute rather a fierce fire! **“Take heed.”** That is the word of a King. It is the word of incarnate Light. It is the word of absolute Purity. **“Take heed.”**

Let us pause upon the threshold. We have been listening to what He said about murder and adultery; about truth, justice, and love. We have listened to the words, **“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect”** and as we are filled with fear at that requirement, He warns us yet again, **“Take heed!”**

We are bound to listen reverently when Jesus says, **“Take heed.”**

A reason precedes every deed. It may be a very poor one, an utterly false one, but it exists. There was never a deed done, but that it was preceded by a dream; never a victory won, but that it was inspired by a vision. Therefore the King says: Get your right dream, your true vision; that is, see to it that your motive is pure.

Motive is everything in the Kingdom.

**“Take heed that ye do not your alms before men.”**

- If we give alms that men may see us, we fail utterly in the ethic of this Kingdom.  
- If we pray to be heard of men, or seen of men, our prayer is not prayer in this Kingdom. - If we fast that men may be impressed with our religious devotion, we have our reward, but we are not in this Kingdom.

Thus the King denounces as unworthy all religious acting which is inspired by the opinion of men. How this scorches and burns! Dare any of us bring our lives to this test? We dare, we must, but it is a terrible ordeal.

- How much have we prayed before men?
- How much of our conduct is regulated by the opinion of men, and the thought of men?
- How much of our lower things, and even of our higher affairs, are under the impulse of what men will think?

Probably the vast majority of people are more influenced by what men will say, than by what God Almighty thinks.

But listen again:

**“Do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.”**

God has no reward for the man who is living before men. Thus the negative statement of principle becomes positive, in that it teaches us that the one, all-inclusive, all-satisfactory motive of life is to be well pleasing to God. That is the ethic of the King.

He now proceeds to make application of the principle.

First to alms, beginning in the external, with that which reveals to men, our relationship to God.

**“Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee.”**

This is a picture of the popular method of the hour in which Jesus lived. It is an actual piece of portraiture. Some Pharisee, intending to distribute gifts, would come to a conspicuous place in the city, and blow a small silver trumpet, at which there would gather round him the maimed, the halt, the blind.

Then, with a great show of generosity, he would scatter gifts upon them. We may say that has no interest for us in these days. But it has interest for all time; for here, as ever, if the Eastern and local coloring has faded from the picture, the great lines of truth stand out.

Listen to the sarcasm of Jesus, **“Verily I say unto you, They have their reward;”** they did it to be seen of men; they have been seen of men; that is all they need; they have what they sought. **“But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth; that thine alms may be in secret.”**

Nothing is in secret finally - **“Thy Father Which seeth in secret Himself shall reward thee.”**

Your Father has to do with that secret thing. Your Father has to do with the hidden things, the motives, the reasons that lie at the back of life; and He says that the secret alms, given from secret love, He will reward.

Amos, in scathing sarcasm and denunciation of the people of his own age, said, You **“proclaim and publish the free offerings.”** And this age is a continuation of the age of Amos. The King declares that this is not righteousness before God.

If I left this here, where Jesus did not leave it, it would present a very difficult ideal. Yet it is simple, if motives are right; and therefore we go beyond this externality, this giving to others; to that deeper thing that ought to underlie such giving the preparation of prayer. The order of statement is, first, Divine relationship in its outward expression toward men alms; and secondly, Divine relationship in its secret expression toward God - prayer.

Here again we have first an application of the principle to the communion of man with God. It is to be between the man and God. The popular method, to be seen of men, again meets with the sarcasm of Christ - "**They have their reward.**"

Then follow instructions for prayer.

First, privacy - go to your inner chamber, shut the door. That is the true place of prayer. We call the church building the house of prayer. In a secondary sense it is so, but the true place of prayer, for the man who is in the Kingdom, is in the inner chamber with the door shut. How much do we know of the inner chamber and the shut door? When a man announces that he is always, at such a time, in the inner chamber, with the door shut, that is a denial of secrecy. The principle is that we go there when no one else knows; that we escape from human observation to loneliness with God. That is the first principle of prayer.

The next matter is directness. When you find your way into that inner chamber and the door is shut, "**pray to thy Father.**" Directness of application and directness of statement are included in this simple phrase.

There is a story which strikingly illustrates this principle of directness in prayer. In a Yorkshire chapel a prayer meeting was being held, and a few people were there who knew what prayer meant. There wandered into that meeting a man from the city, who had very little understanding of the force and fire and fervour of true prayer meetings. He had that most terrible habit of making prayers; and he made a prayer in that prayer meeting which consisted of beautiful sentences, in which he gave God all kinds of information which He had long before this man was born. For well nigh twenty minutes he prayed. At last he said, "And now, Lord, what more shall we say unto Thee?"

One old man, who knew his way into the Secret Place, and knew what prayer was, and who was weary and tired of this exhibition, cried out, "Call Him Feyther, mon, and ax for summat." That is the whole philosophy of prayer. "**Pray to thy Father.**"

And then simplicity, "**not vain repetitions.**" Of course this again is local coloring, for these Orientals would take one sentence, and repeat it again and again, imagining that the exhaustion that such repetition produced was a sign of power. Privacy, directness, simplicity, are the notes of true prayer.

He then gave them a pattern. In the opening sentence we have a great doctrine of God - "**Our Father Which art in heaven.**" The word here is plural, though our translators have not shown it; "Our Father Who art in the heavens."

The New Testament speaks at least of three heavens:

- **“The birds of the air,”** where the reference is to the atmosphere encircling the earth.
  - **“Wonders in heaven,”** where the stellar spaces are intended.
  - **“Caught up to the third heaven,”** that is, beyond the stellar spaces, to the place of the supreme manifestation of the presence of God.
- “Our Father Which art in heaven”** - all of them.

- That is a doctrine of *the transcendence of God*; He is far away beyond all that of which we can be conscious.

- It is also a doctrine of *the immanence of God*; He is in the very air we breathe, as well as far away, infinitely out beyond the possibility of the mind’s comprehension; in all infinite spaces, and in all near details, everywhere.

That doctrine of God is the doctrine which enables a man to pray.

Again He is Father. If we understand that, we shall not stay arguing as to the possibility of prayer. We shall pray.

This pattern of prayer also reveals the true order of prayer.

It falls naturally into two halves:

- The first has to do with God’s Kingdom;
- The second with our need.

**“Our Father Which art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in earth, as it is in heaven.”**

That is the first concern in prayer. Prayer is not first of all a means by which we get something for ourselves; it is rather a method of helping God to get something for Himself. Thus, as in life, so also in prayer, the same law obtains **“Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”**

Apply this pattern of prayer to much of our praying, and we are ashamed!

We pray about our need, and our family, and our neighbors, and our Church, and our country; and if we have a few minutes at the end, we pray for the missionaries. Jesus says that this is all wrong, for first must come God’s Kingdom, and then our need. There is nothing omitted from that prayer.

- Our daily sustenance physical, mental, spiritual it is all there in **“daily bread.”**
- Our inter-relationship amongst men **“Forgive us . . . as we forgive.”**

We cannot expect forgiveness while there is malice in our heart. It is the only petition of which Jesus gives us an exposition. It will not do to say:

We will forgive our debtors. We must get our paying done, before we begin our praying. And finally, prayer concerning the conflict with evil. “**Lead us not into temptation**” that is the sense of fearfulness; “**But deliver us from evil**” that is the determination that whether through temptation or without it, the supreme matter is that of deliverance from evil.

Yet look at the prayer again. It is the inspirer of work. “**Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done.**” If we are praying that way we must live that way, we must work that way; not merely for ourselves, but for our city, our nation, and the world, that everywhere God’s name may be hallowed, God’s Kingdom come, God’s will be done. We shall work along that line if we pray in that way.

Then, again, it is the prayer of trust:

- We need sustenance; we tell our Father about it.
- We need restoration; we go to our Father.
- We need discipline; we talk to Him about it as we stand upon the threshold of it.

Then observe the socialism, the communism of the prayer. We must use a strong word because it is a strong prayer. Notice the pronouns of the prayer, the pronouns in the first person; “**Our - us - our - us - our - we - our - us - us.**” There is not a pronoun in the first person singular. They are all plural. We cannot pray that prayer alone. There is no room for selfishness there. We are bound to bring somebody else in with us. It is interesting moreover to look at the cases here.

There are four possessives, four objectives, and only one nominative.

The nominative case is the popular one. We always like to be the subject of the sentence, and use the capital We. There is only one nominative here, and it occurs when we say, “**as we forgive our debtors.**”

The only right we have to be the subject of the sentence is the right to forgive the man who has wronged us. That is prayer according to Jesus. It is a great social prayer. We cannot pray it alone, and yet we should go alone and pray it. He says, “**Enter into thy closet, and . . . shut thy door,**” and when nobody is there but yourself, begin to pray as though the whole world were with you. That is Christ’s socialism. It is based upon strong individualism; individually, a man alone with God; socially the world on the heart, as the prayer is offered. If we learn to pray this way, a great deal of praying will cease, and a great deal of praying will begin.

And now the final matter - “**When ye fast.**”

The popular method is a sad countenance, a disfigured face, “**That they may appear unto men to fast.**” What is Christ’s instruction? “**Anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.**” That is the true method of restraint and of self-denial.

We are perpetually insisting upon the necessity for self-denial, and we do well to insist upon it. It is at the very heart and center of Christian life. That is the process by which the life is made strenuous. The athlete denies himself a great many things, in themselves harmless and proper, in order to win. There must be self-denial, there must be restraint, there must be fasting. But the mistake is that we fast in order that men may think how good we are. We get our reward, and there is nothing beyond. But if fasting is for the purpose of finding the stronger, the truer, the nobler; in order to create larger room for the coming and going and sweep of the Spirit then it is true. But what are to be the outward signs of fasting?

The sad countenance and the disfigured face? Rather the washed face and the anointed head. Is it not time that we in the Christian Church talked a little less about self-denial, and lived it more? Have we not by over emphasizing in our conventions on the one hand, and on the other, in the new ascetic ideal manifesting itself in scourging, been false to this word of Jesus, “**Anoint thine head, and wash thy face**”? Oh, my life, thou shouldest keep perpetual Lent within the secret chamber of thy being, and everlasting Easter on thy face! The inner life must always be a denial of self, but we must come to the world with a smile and a song, and the anointed head, and the washed face. This is religion, this is life.

These are three great subjects, and they mark the revelation of man to God alms, and prayer, and fasting. Deny the Divine existence, wholly or in part, and wholly or in part all these will cease. As a man loses his hold upon God, or as a man comes to deny God altogether, these things cease in the inverted order. First, fasting ceases. Then prayer ceases, for a man cannot pray unless he fasts that inner fasting of the life; if that cease, prayer will cease. And then alms will cease. A man gives less now than when he had less to give, because he has been so very busy getting, that he forgot to pray. He forgot that not in making, but in fasting, is the real strength of life, and there is always degradation and deterioration, when that is forgotten.

These words and these deeds and these activities must be undertaken in actual relationship with Him. Alms must be given in the consciousness of His observation. Prayer must be offered in the place of loneliness with Him. Fasting must be solely a means of helping communion with Him.

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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