

SOM: SECOND TASK & THREE PRACTICES (6:1-18)

Second Task for Jesus' Disciples: Worship God as Jesus Instructed (Matt 6:1-18) ¹

- A. [General principle](#): Do acts of righteousness to please God (6:10)
- B. [Triad of instructions](#) (6:2-18)
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A. General principle: Do acts of righteousness to please God (6:1)

6:1 "Beware of practicing your piety [righteousness] before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. (NRSV)

6:1 Προσέχετε [δὲ] τὴν δικαιοσύνην ὑμῶν μὴ ποιεῖν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι αὐτοῖς· εἰ δὲ μὴ γε, μισθὸν οὐκ ἔχετε παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ ὑμῶν τῷ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

The structure of 6:1-18 is similar to 5:21-48. Both have a general introduction employing the word *dikaïosunē* (5:20; 6:1) and have similar structures.² Whereas 5:21-48 introduced “traditional commands,” 6:1-18 introduce “traditional practices” of giving alms (6:2-4), praying (6:5-15), and fasting (6:16-18).³

B. Triad of instructions (6:2-18)

0. Preliminary comments

Structure. The following triads have a three-part structure:⁴

- (i) Traditional practice (the act): “When you ... ” (2a; 5a; 7a; 16a).
- (ii) Vicious cycle (the prohibition): Each has a warning “do not”
- (iii) Transforming initiative (the prescription): Each uses the imperative

All three practices concludes with “Your Father who sees you in secret will reward you” (vv. 4b; 6b; 18b) and the Lord’s Prayer concludes with two references to “your

¹ Outline is a modification of Dale C. Allison, “The Structure of the Sermon on the Mount,” *JBL* 106 (1987): 423-45 and Glen H. Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” *JBL* (2003).

² Each of the six units in 5:21-48 begins with “you have heard that it was said” (or “it was said”) and each of the three units in 6:1-18 begins with “whenever you” (or “when you”). Both sections have *de* (δέ) constructions introducing positive transforming initiatives (6:1-18) or negative consequences (5:21-48). In 6:1-18, “Amen, I say to you” introduces negative consequences. In 5:21-48, “But I say to you” introduces positive statements.

³ Stassen, “Fourteen Triads” *JBL* (2003).

⁴ Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, 107; Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 102-02.

Father” (v. 14). This implies a father-child relationship between God and Jesus’ disciples.

Traditional practice: Stassen argues that for each traditional practice—giving to the poor, praying to God, and fasting—we are invited to *participate* in grace and compassion of the KG. Each practice provides an opportunity to demonstrate righteousness as “restorative justice” and “delivering justice”.

Vicious cycle: Jesus then offers a warning not to practice for show or expecting a reward from God—worship, not theater.

Transforming initiative: Lastly, Jesus offers a transforming initiative—to practice in secret, knowing that God is present. In all four units, Jesus concludes by pointing out that God is presence, compassionate, and redemptive—the characteristics of God’s Reign that emerged from the prophet Isaiah.⁵

1. Giving: Whenever you give (6:2-4)

Matt 6:2-4. ² “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (NRSV)

Matt 6:2-4. ² “Όταν οὖν ποιῆς ἐλεημοσύνην, μὴ σαλπίσσης ἔμπροσθέν σου, ὥσπερ οἱ ὑποκριταὶ ποιοῦσιν ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς καὶ ἐν ταῖς ῥύμαις, ὅπως δοξασθῶσιν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν. ³ σοῦ δὲ ποιοῦντος ἐλεημοσύνην μὴ γνώτω ἡ ἀριστερά σου τί ποιεῖ ἡ δεξιὰ σου, ⁴ ὅπως ᾗ σου ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ· καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀποδώσει σοι.

a. Traditional practice (v. 2)

Jesus expects all his followers to give charity. Giving is a spiritual discipline. It positions us to experience God’s presence and power is giving. When we give, we exercise our faith in God. When we give, we are trusting God to provide for us and we don’t need to be so self-reliant.

b. Vicious cycle (v. 2)

There is a wrong way to give called, *Blowing a trumpet*. This is a metaphorical way to talk about calling attention to oneself as the “hypocrites” (actors), who pretend to be something they are not.

⁵ Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, 109.

c. Transforming initiative (v. 3)

There is a right way to give: *Not let the left hand know what the right hand is doing*. I think this means giving as quietly and unobtrusively as possible—“in secret” (v. 4).⁶

We give because we love God or we want to please God. Of course, we cannot give material things to God. So the next best thing is to give to God’s creatures, who have unmet needs (redemptive righteousness). When we give to people, expecting nothing in return, it is like saying, “Here, God, I love you, this is for you.”

Jesus is presenting tradition Jewish teaching. Giving to the poor is giving to God.

Prov. 14:31 Whoever gives to the poor, honors God.

When we give to others, expecting nothing from them, God gives to us.

Prov. 19:17. Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full (Prov 22:9).

In giving, we receive inner satisfaction. Every act of giving opens our eyes to the Kingdom of God. In every act of giving, we transcend our self-centered, narcissistic self. It moves us toward union with God.

2. Prayer: Whenever you pray (6:5-6)

Prayer is another traditional spiritual practice that puts us in a healthy relationship with God.

Matt 6:5-6. ⁵ "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matt 6:5-6. ⁵ Καὶ ὅταν προσεύχησθε, οὐκ ἔσεσθε ὡς οἱ ὑποκριταί, ὅτι φιλοῦσιν ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς καὶ ἐν ταῖς γωνίαις τῶν πλατειῶν ἑστῶτες προσεύχεσθαι, ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν. ⁶ σὺ δὲ ὅταν προσεύχη, εἰσελθε εἰς τὸ ταμεῖόν σου καὶ κλείσας τὴν θύραν σου πρόσευξαι τῷ πατρὶ σου τῷ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ· καὶ ὁ πατὴρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀποδώσει σοι.

a. Traditional practice (v. 5)

⁶ Richard Gardner, *Matthew*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1991) 116.

When you pray recalls the three daily times of prayer (morning, noon, and evening) that Jews were required to pray (cf. Acts 3:1; 10:30; Did. 8:3).⁷

Stand and pray. The *Amidah* (which is from the verb ‘to stand’) or Eighteen Benedictions were done standing. Allison thinks that praying with bent knees was for only solemn occasions (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:54; Matt 26:39; Acts 20:36; 21:5).

b. Vicious cycle (v. 5)

Do not be like the hypocrites. Jesus condemns prayer that has the wrong intention; he’s condemning “performance prayer” or prayer for “theater,” which is not addressed to God but onlookers. For Jews, regular prayer (*tefillah*) and blessing (*berachah*) must be done with “right intention” (Heb. *kavvanah*) and not just mindlessly or for the sake of impressing others.⁸

The Rabbis taught: “All depends on the intention of the heart” (*b. Meggillah* 20a).

If the intent is right, then one can pray before others as Jesus did (Matt 11:25-30; 15:36; 26:36-46).

c. Transforming initiative (v. 6)

3. Prayer: When you are praying (6:7-15)

Matt 6:7-15. ⁷ "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread. ¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. ¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (NRSV)

Matt 6:7-15. ⁷ Προσευχόμενοι δὲ μὴ βατταλογήσητε ὡσπερ οἱ ἔθνηκοί, δοκοῦσιν γὰρ ὅτι ἐν τῇ πολυλογίᾳ αὐτῶν εἰσακουσθήσονται. ⁸ μὴ οὖν ὁμοιωθῆτε αὐτοῖς· οἶδεν γὰρ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὃν χρεῖαν ἔχετε πρὸ τοῦ ὑμᾶς αἰτῆσαι αὐτόν. ⁹ οὕτως οὖν προσεύχεσθε ὑμεῖς· Πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς· ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου· ¹⁰ ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου· γεννηθῆτω τὸ θέλημά σου, ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς· ¹¹ τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον· ¹² καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν· ¹³ καὶ μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν, ἀλλὰ ῥύσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ. ¹⁴ Ἐὰν γὰρ ἀφήτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν, ἀφήσει καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος· ¹⁵ εἰ δὲ μὴ ἀφήτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, οὐδὲ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἀφήσει τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν.

a. Traditional practice (v. 7)

⁷ So Allison, 110.

⁸ See Ted Falcon and David Blatner, *Judaism for Dummies*, 47-48.

Prayer.

b. Vicious cycle (v. 7-8)

Do not heap up empty phrases. Do not be like them.

c. Transforming initiative (v. 9-15)

(1) Our Father

Jesus invites us to talk with God *as if* God were our Parent. We do four things when we call God, “Our Father.”

- 1) We imitate Jesus, who called God, *Abba*.
- 2) We assert we will live as God’s children—we will live up to God’s image.
- 3) We recall God’s power and protection, but may also think of God in motherly images (e.g., Isa 66:13, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you”).⁹
- 4) We affirm our communal, non-individualistic, status as children of God’s family.

(2) First three petitions focus on God

The first three petitions focus on God—*thy* name, *thy* kingdom, *thy* will—and also expresses our commitment.

In the first petition, we commit ourselves **to hallow or honor God’s name**. In effect, we are praying “that God will vindicate his name—that all may see who he really is—and fulfill his promises for his people.”¹⁰

In the second, we affirm our desire for **God’s kingdom to come**, especially as Jesus described it in the beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12).

In the third, we dedicate ourselves to **God’s will**, making God’s reign (in heaven) a here-and-now reality (on earth). This includes enacting Jesus’ six sayings about reconciliation, adultery, divorce, truth-telling, peacemaking, and love of enemies (Matt 5:17-48).

⁹ Also see Isa. 49:15, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

¹⁰ William W. Klein, *Become What You Are: Spiritual Formation According to the Sermon on the Mount* (Tyrone, Ga: Authentic Books, 2006) 148.

(3) Second four petitions focus on us

The second four petitions focus on us—give *us*, forgive *us*, lead *us* not, deliver *us*:

In the fourth petition, we ask God **to give us bread**. We're asking God to meet our needs. Whatever our needs are—food water, clothes, jobs, car repairs, money, love, children, friends, justice—whatever is needed, we are to ask God for it.

In the fifth, we ask God **to forgive us** of our “debts” (*opheilēma*). Literally, it refers to what we owe financially. Luke’s version has “sins” (*hamartias*). The point is, this petition implies that we owe God something—and we need God’s forgiveness. Moreover, forgiveness is conditional; if we forgive, we are forgiven (see Matt 5:7; 6:14-15).

In the sixth, we ask God not to allow us “**to be tempted**” (RSV). The Greek word, *peirasmos*, can also be translated “the time of trial” (NRSV). In effect, we are asking God not to test our faith beyond our endurance (1 Cor 10:13).

In the seventh, we ask God **to rescue us from evil** or the “evil one.” Either translation is permissible. When testing does come, give us the wisdom and the fortitude (strength, courage) not to make evil choices.¹¹

(4) Forgiveness

Jesus thinks that forgiveness is so important he adds a footnote to the Prayer. This is an elaboration on the fifth petition.

Matt 6:14-15. ¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (NRSV)

Forgiveness has conditions. Forgiveness required repentance—turning away from evil and any harmful activity. Holding a grudge against someone or failing to forgive someone is not turning from evil, but embracing it.

If people fail to release grudges or fail to forgive, hate festers and destroys people.

¹¹ The last line on the Lord’s Prayer is *in italics*—“*for thine in the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever*”—indicating it was probably not in the original prayer. The earliest manuscript that includes that line dates from the fifth century (the Washington Codex).

4. Fasting: Whenever you fast (6:16-18)

Matt 6:16-18. ¹⁶ "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (NRSV)

Matt 6:16-18. ¹⁶ "Όταν δὲ νηστεύητε, μὴ γίνεσθε ὡς οἱ ὑποκριταὶ σκυθρωποὶ, ἀφανίζουσιν γὰρ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύοντες· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν. ¹⁷ σὺ δὲ νηστεύων ἄλειψαί σου τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὸ πρόσωπόν σου νίψαι, ¹⁸ ὅπως μὴ φανῆς τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύων ἀλλὰ τῷ πατρὶ σου τῷ ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ· καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ ἀποδώσει σοι.

a. Traditional practice (v. 16)

Jesus assumes fasting is beneficial. Jesus says, "When you fast," meaning that he expects his disciples to fast. Jesus fasted (Luke 4:1-11) and so did his disciples (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).¹²

b. Vicious cycle (v. 16)

Do not fast for show or theater. Do not fast for others. In Jewish culture, fasting went with outward signs of mourning, like wearing sackcloth, ashes, and tearing cloths (Dan 9:3; Jonah 3:5; Judith 8:5).

Jesus warns against such "disfigurement"—going unwashed and covering oneself with ashes. Fasting is between you and God, and for your inner benefit, not for outward display. Fasting is not for political manipulation or for gaining religious status or enhancing one's reputation. So there are dangers to fasting.

Fast for one's self and as a demonstration of one's commitment and reliance on God.

c. Transforming initiative (v. 17-18)

The transforming initiative is to dress with joy and God will reward you. Jesus promises that when one fasts with the proper intentionality, God will reward. It is not that God will reward someone with a Lamborghini or Maserati or winning the lottery.

¹² Although sometimes Jesus did not fast and didn't expect his disciples (Mk 2:18-19; Lk 5:34).

Rather, I believe that fasting teaches discipline, self-knowledge, and dependence on God—the reward is Christlikeness.

How do we become like Christ? This passage suggests two ways: *nonattachment* and *ego transcendence*.

Nonattachment

The first benefit is that fasting helps us learn *nonattachment*. An attachment can be a behavior, an emotion, a substance, or anything else a person is not willing to give up (we may not have to give it up, but be willing to do so to be free of addiction).

An attachment (addiction) is an emotionally backed demand—“I must have what I want and I will not be happy unless I have it.”¹³ An attachment—anything we are unwilling to give up—is a compulsion, obsession, or preoccupation that controls us.

Attachments make us unhappy, steal our time, and retard our spiritual growth. Practicing nonattachment is a catalyst for spiritual development.

When we fast, we learn nonattachment. When we fast, we learn *experientially*—in the fabric of our brain and body—that we can give up things, even vital things, for a brief period of time.

Why practice giving things up, like food? Because when we fast, we gain freedom and strength of will, which are important elements of spiritual growth—that’s the reward Jesus talks about: “Father who sees in secret will reward you” (6:18).

Liberation from the False Self

The second benefit of fasting is learning to be liberated from the *sarx*. The *sarx* is traditionally translated “flesh” in the Bible and it refers to an orientation of life focusing on one’s own self or ego. (See handout on the benefits of spiritual disciplines).

¹³ Gerald May states that addictions are “caused by attachments, or nailing, of desire to specific objects. The word *behavior* is especially important in this definition, for it indicates that *action* is essential to addiction.” However, May goes on to say that “thinking is also a behavior, a ‘doing.’ Thus images, memories, fantasies, ideas, concepts, and even certain feeling states can become objects of attachment, and one can become fully addicted to them.... Some of us might even admit to having been addicted to certain moods—depression, shyness, cynicism, and the like.” See Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1988) 24-25. May identifies five essential characteristics of addiction: (1) tolerance, (2) withdrawal symptoms, (3) self-deception, (4) loss of willpower, and (5) distortion of attention (May, 1988, 25-26).