

The Disciplines We Need

Matthew 6:1-18

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Introduction:

- In recent months, and this past week, we've seen so much violence in our nation.
 - So much hate and anger, even against little children.
- And I know it can be discouraging.
 - And you may wonder, if there's anything the church can do.
 - You may wonder what more you can do, in a dark time like today?
- Well, Jesus gives us the answer right here, in the Sermon on the Mount.
 - The Bible speaks directly to our situation today.
 - Jesus says: ***You are the salt of the earth.*** Matthew 5:13
 - ***You are the light of the world.*** Matthew 5:14
 - That means we're able to bring light in the darkness.
 - That means, we have power to fight against decay.
- But how can we do that, when there's so much anger, and lust, and lying, and hate?
 - We saw the answer last week.
 - Jesus calls us:
 - To be peacemakers, calming anger with the peace of God.
 - To be holy, just as God is holy.
 - To be trustworthy, even if it means suffering loss.
 - To be merciful, instead of vengeful.
 - To be people who love, even if that means loving those who stand against us, to love our enemy.
 - I said this in an earlier sermon, but let me quote Martin Lloyd Jones, one more time.
 - He says, *The world today is looking for, and desperately needs, true Christians. I am never tired of saying that what the Church needs to do is not to organize evangelistic campaigns to attract outside people, but to begin herself to live the Christian life.*
- What the world needs most today isn't more angry voices, but more shining lights.
 - The louder the darkness grows, the brighter the light of Christ needs to shine.
 - And in our passage we'll see, how we can shine our light in our world today.
- Now, I want you to see how Matthew divides our passage, into 3 sections.
 - And notice how each section begins with the phrase, *And when you..*
 - In verse 2, he says, ***When you give...***
 - Then in verse 5, he says, ***And when you pray...***
 - And then, in verse 16, he says, ***And when you fast...***

- Matthew also speaks about secrecy, and reward.
 - Give in secret, and God will reward.
 - Pray in secret, and God will reward.
 - Fast in secret, and God will reward.
 - In these 18 verses, the word, secret, occurs 6 times.
 - And the word, reward, occurs 7 times.
 - Matthew 6, 1 to 18 is one teaching unit.
- And in verse 1, Matthew gives the main theme of this whole section.
 - He writes:
 - ***Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*** Matthew 6:1
 - Do you hear the warning?
 - There was, and still is, a strong temptation to do good things, not to please God, but to be noticed and admired by others.
 - But in the verses that follow, the Bible shows, how we can live, not for the approval of man, but for the glory of God.
 - This passage shows, how we can worship Christ, with all our heart, so we can shine our light in our world.

Point 1:

- First, the Bible shows how we can worship God in our giving.
- In verse 2, Jesus warns against sounding the trumpet, when giving or helping others.
 - There were some people who gave, to make a name for themselves.
- We see an example of this in Acts chapter 5.
 - Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of land they owned, and they donated some of the money to the church.
 - This of course, can be a good thing to do.
 - But instead of telling the church how they kept some of the money from the sale, which would've been fine for them to do, they lied and said they donated all the money they made from this property.
 - Instead of giving to please God, they lied, to make a name for themselves.
- I want to be clear, there are times when people will know how you give and how you serve.
 - There's nothing wrong with that.
 - Barnabas sold property and gave it to the church.
 - And the whole church knew about this.
 - In fact, that's why Ananias and Sapphira sold their property, because they wanted the honor people gave to Barnabas.
 - But unlike Barnabas, who gave to please God, they wanted to be praised by others.

- But here, Jesus shows us how to give, to please God and not man.
 - He says, ***But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing...*** Matthew 6:3
 - Your hands are used to give and serve others.
 - They're both a part of who you are.
 - And when Jesus says don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, he's commanding us to forget about ourselves when we give.
 - You could say he's saying, *Don't let yourself know, what yourself is doing.*
 - Don't boast, don't dwell, don't find our security and worth in your giving.
 - But rather, give out of love.
- A couple of months ago, one of my kids came in, and said, *"You need to come outside, this is really serious, someone got hurt. Like, I'm not joking, I heard a crack."*
 - One of my kids broke their foot.
 - And so, my wife and I ran outside, because we were worried about our son.
 - But as I ran to my son, I wasn't thinking to myself, *"You know, I'm a pretty good dad. I wish the people at church could see how I am running outside to care for my son. I just ran outside to help my son. My left hand didn't know, what my right hand was doing."*
 - I was just thinking about my son.
- That's what Jesus is talking about here.
 - He's teaching us to give, without thinking about ourselves, or how others will think of us.
 - But rather to give and serve, to honor God, and to love others.
- The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3
 - ***If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.***
 - You could pray with beautiful words, you could have vision to start large movements, you could understand deep theological truth, you could have faith to do what others can't, you could even give yourself to be burned.
 - But the Bible says, without love, you're nothing, and you gain nothing.
 - True giving, is about loving others, and loving God.
 - It's by giving with love, we can truly be light in this world.
- Now, I don't think anyone here would lie about their giving.
 - But the context here, is about helping people in need.
 - And so, let's think about, when our love may get distracted, when helping.
- We may get upset, when we feel overlooked.
 - We'll put in the hours, we'll sacrifice, we'll care for others, and when no one seems to notice, that can be discouraging.
 - But remember, there will always be seasons when we need to serve in obscurity.
 - When there's no applause or spotlight.

- Whether caring for a loved one, or serving those in the church, or working behind the scenes.
 - Others won't always see.
 - And in those seasons, we need to remember that we're serving the Lord.
 - And God is pleased, when you serve with a loving heart.
 - And if you remember that, you'll be able to serve with joy, and not bitterness.
 - You'll be able to serve with gratitude and not grumbling.
- There will also be times when God places you to serve, not in your area of gifting, but in your area of weakness.
 - And you may feel anxious about failing.
 - You may feel self-conscious about your performance and what others think.
 - If that is you, remember, no matter what happens, even if things don't turn out the way you wanted, that's where God wants you to be.
 - Knowing this will release you to serve, with freedom and not with fear.
 - With confidence and not insecurity.
 - And remember this, when we give and serve to honor Christ, we can find tremendous strength.
 - You'll find strength to serve, because you know you're pleasing God.
 - Even though no one recognizes what you're doing, it won't matter.
 - Even if things don't turn out the way you planned, it won't matter.
 - Why?
 - Because you know, you're serving the Lord.
 - Because you're giving to the Lord.
 - The most joyful, and fulfilling way to give, is by forgetting about yourself, and honoring God.
 - Psalm 73 verse 26 states, ***My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.***
 - Give to the Lord, with all your heart, and you can shine the light of Christ, in our world today.

Point 2:

- Second, not only does Jesus speak about our giving, but he shows how we can worship in our praying.
- There were 3 set times of prayer each day, in the morning, afternoon, and evening.
 - And during these times, some leaders would make it a habit of praying in the street corners, at the hour of prayer.
 - They prayed to be seen and heard by others.
 - That's why Jesus says in verse 5, ***You must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.***

- Others prayed by babbling or heaping up empty words.
 - He says:
 - ***When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.*** Matthew 6:7
 - They would repeat phrases, over and over, thinking God would listen to them.
 - Sometimes they would even hurt themselves, thinking God would hear them, because of the way they were physically hurting themselves.
 - The prophets of Baal did this.
 - They cut themselves with swords, they shouted all morning and evening.
 - They were trying to use God, even manipulate God to do what they wanted him to do.
- But in our passage, Jesus shows, the right way to pray.
 - When you look at Lord's prayer, what you notice is how God centered it is, and not man centered.
 - It's about honoring God's name, and praying for his kingdom to come, and his will to be done.
 - This prayer is the exact opposite of how the pagans prayed.
 - The pagans babbled and hurt themselves, thinking they could control God, so could get what they wanted.
 - But this prayer in Matthew 6, is centered on God's will, and not our will.
 - It's a prayer that honors God, and not man.
 - It's prayer that trusts God's will, and not our will.
 - It's a prayer that takes comfort in God's sovereign plan.
- When I look back on my prayer life, there are some prayers, I'm so glad God answered in a different way than I wanted.
 - Before coming to The Orchard, in 2013, I applied for another pastoral position at another church.
 - And I really asked God to help me get that job.
 - And I was so sad, when I didn't get that job.
 - At the moment, I was so disappointed.
 - But looking back, I'm so glad, God didn't answer my prayer, in my will, but in his will.
 - Rather, then getting that position, God allowed me to get a position at The Orchard Itasca.
 - It was an uncertain time for my family, and I didn't understand what God was doing.
 - But God had a plan.
 - One of the most comforting prayers you can pray is, your kingdom come, your will be done.
- Not only does Jesus teach how we need to pray God's will, he also shows the need for private prayer.
 - He writes, ***But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret...*** Matthew 6:6
 - Now, I hear someone saying, "Well Pastor Tom, I guess I don't have to come to Pray First anymore, I gotta pray at home. Sorry Pastor Tom, gotta follow what Jesus says."
 - Let me be clear, Jesus isn't saying we shouldn't pray in public.
 - He even says in Matthew 18, ***For where two or three are gathered in my name,*** there am I among them. Matthew 18:20

- Theologian John Calvin believed listening to public prayers, would teach people to pray in private.
- And so, I really do hope you can come to our next Pray First.
- But then, what does Jesus mean here?
- He's teaching us to pray out of love and dependence on God, not to impress people.
- He's reminding us that our public prayers, need to flow out of our private prayers.
- And this is so important, because that's where our power for the Christian life comes from.
 - We can gain strength, when we learn to pray, not just at church, but everyday.
- In Mark 1:35, the Bible says that Jesus departed early in the morning and went to a desolate place to pray.
 - Even Jesus, the Lord and master of the universe prayed in private.
 - And after praying, Jesus was able to preach God's word, and do the work of ministry.
 - His private spiritual life, gave him power for his public ministry.
- We see another example of this in Mark 9.
 - Jesus was away from his disciples, and a father brought his demon possessed son to the disciples.
 - So, they might cast him out.
 - Sadly, they weren't able to cast the demon out.
 - Finally, Jesus comes, and casts the demon out.
 - Later, the disciples ask Jesus, ***"Why could we not cast it out?"*** Mark 9:28
 - And do you remember what Jesus said to them?
 - He said, ***"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."*** Mark 9:29
 - Now of course, the disciples must've prayed out loud, in front of everyone to cast the demon out.
 - Then what was Jesus talking about?
 - What kind of prayer was he speaking about?
 - In Mark 9, Jesus was speaking about on going, personal private prayer.
 - Their public ministry suffered, because their private connection to God was absent.
- I don't think any of you here are going to be tempted to go into the street corners to pray.
 - But more likely, people today are tempted to neglect private prayer.
 - *"Well, Pastor Tom prayed for me at church, so I should be good until next week."*
 - But let's remember the importance of private prayer.
 - It's through private prayer, that Nehemiah gained passion to build the walls of Jerusalem.
 - It's through private prayer, Elijah found strength after running from Jezebel.
 - It's through private prayer, that Cornelius came to know Jesus Christ.
 - And it's through prayer that we can connect with God.
 - It's through prayer that we can draw strength from Christ.
 - It's through prayer that we can fight against temptation.
- The church in Acts, made a great impact in the world.
 - And one of the reasons was because they devoted themselves to prayer.
 - And it's when we devote ourselves to prayer, that we can shine our light.
 - Some people ask me:

- *Pastor, how can I share my faith with others?*
- *I don't know what to do?*
- The first thing you need to do, is to pray.
- That's why Jesus told his disciples to wait and pray in Jerusalem, before sharing the gospel to the world.
- Those were his first instructions in the book of Acts.
- It's when we pray, that we can find power, to shine our light in our world today.

Point 3:

- Jesus speaks about our giving, our praying, and then third and finally he shows how we can worship in our fasting.
- It was the practice of the religious leaders to fast, to not eat, on the Day of Atonement, as well as the New Year.
 - The Pharisees also made it a point to fast every Monday and Thursday.
 - And some of the Pharisees would wear sackcloth and ashes, and make a sad face, to show they were fasting.
 - They made their faces unrecognizable, to be recognized by others.
- But Jesus tells them, ***But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face...*** Matthew 6:17
 - To anoint your head, and wash your face, means that you draw attention away from yourself.
 - In fact, the whole point of fasting wasn't to show off, but to remind yourself, that you need God.
 - To focus, not on what others think, but to learn to devote yourself to God, and your need for him.
- Now, I don't think anyone here is going to put on sackcloth and ashes to boast about their fasting.
 - But it's possible, that instead of depending on God, we can begin to depend on ourselves to accomplish our work, to change other people, to change our circumstances.
 - Perhaps to make ourselves look better, or to get the result we want, we may try to do things our own way.
 - But here, Jesus reminds us that when we feel uncertain, when we feel powerless, when we feel weak, what we need to do, is to wait on God, and trust his word, and depend on him.
- When Jesus was fasting in the wilderness and he was hungry, the devil came and tempted him.
 - The devil said to him, ***"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."***
 - Satan wanted Jesus to disobey God, and to do things his own way.
 - Don't wait on God.
 - Don't trust in the Father.
 - You have the power Jesus, show how powerful you are to the world.
 - Show them what you're made of.
 - But remember what Jesus said?

- Jesus said, ***It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*** Matthew 4:4
- Instead of eating the bread, Jesus trusted the Father's word, and he honored the Father.
- And because of this, he was able to bring glory to the Father.
- He was able to bring light in the darkness.

Conclusion:

- Earlier I said, Matthew uses the word secret, 6 times, and the word, reward, 7 times.
 - But more than any other word, do you know what's the word that occurs the most in these 18 verses?
 - It's the word, *Father*.
 - In this section, 10 times, Matthew refers to God as, *your Father*, or *our Father*.
- The reason the religious leaders were so focused on themselves, was because they didn't know the Father.
 - They thought God was a slave driver you could pay off with good works.
 - They didn't see, the mercy and love of the Father.
- And if you're here today, and you're feeling distant from God.
 - I invite you to trust in God.
 - He's your heavenly Father, who invites you to trust in him, to believe in him.
- And for those who are faithfully giving, and praying, and devoting yourself to God.
 - Remember that your heavenly Father sees, all the work you're doing for him.
 - Even the secret the things, that no one knows.
 - You may not get recognition in this world.
 - Your countless hours of prayer, your labor of love, your sacrifice.
 - But your heavenly Father, knows, and he sees, and he remembers.
 - In Malachi 3:16, the Bible says:
 - ***Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name.***
 - God remembers your work.
- And remember that he'll also reward you on that last day.
 - Not only does God remember, but he also rewards.
 - He'll wipe away your tears.
 - He'll spare you from your sins.
 - He'll bring healing to your pain.
 - And he'll reward you with so much more, that we can't even see today.
 - ***What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him...*** 1 Corinthians 2:8-10
 - Keep serving the Lord.
 - He will reward you.

- And finally, let's remember, that God is our provider.
 - Matthew 6:8 states, ***"Your Father knows what you need before you ask him..."***
 - God knows what you need.
 - Not too long ago, I was in a meeting.
 - And during the meeting, a pretty important meeting, one person saw that it was their child who was calling, and they got up right away, and took the call.
 - I could feel the love, and care, and concern of this parent.
 - When I see one of my kids, give me a phone call, I'm eager to take the call.
 - It brings me joy, to hear from my children.
 - If I take joy in my children, how much more will God our heavenly Father, take joy in you?
 - How much more would he provide for you?
- And so, for this coming week:
 - Let's think of one way you can give to someone, or serve someone who may need your help.
 - Let's commit to pray, just 10 minutes everyday, before you do anything, and spend time with God, draw strength from him.
 - Let's fast, just one day this week, and pray for one person, who needs to know Jesus Christ.
 - Can you imagine what would happen if all of us, fasted one day this week, to pray for one person who doesn't know Jesus?
 - By doing this, we can be salt and light in our world today.

¹Unless otherwise noted, all references to the Bible are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

²Heidelberg Catechism. 1563. Christian Reformed Church in North America.