

Matthew 6:7-15

⁷[Jesus continued,] “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. ⁸Do 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.

¹⁰Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

In the middle of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses prayer. Unlike in Luke, where the Lord’s Prayer comes as a response to Jesus’ disciples asking him to “teach them to pray,” in Matthew it is situated in the midst of a long series of teachings. This section begins with Jesus saying, “do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” Then follows a long litany of “you have heard that it was said ..., but I say.” Here the old legal rules are transformed to become both stricter and more internal. Not only should you not murder, you shouldn’t even be angry. No more “eye for an eye;” turn the other cheek. Love even your enemies.

And then in chapter 6, the familiar Ash Wednesday gospel reading: do not practice your piety before others. Don’t give alms publicly. Pray in secret. Don’t look dismal when you fast.

Why do we practice our piety, our “religiousness”? Who benefits? Jesus paints a picture of former teaching in which piety was a social activity, a way to see and be seen. We go to church to reinforce our image as good people. We post Christian messages on social media so people know what kind of person we are. But if we do this, says, Jesus, we may receive a reward from other people, but we receive nothing from God.

Is our piety for God, then? But God already knows what we need, Jesus says in verse 8. And if we recall Luther’s Small Catechism, we know that all these things we pray for in the Lord’s Prayer will come to pass “without our prayer,” but we pray that they “may also come to us.” God doesn’t need our prayers in order to act.

If our prayer and other religious practices are not for others, and not for God, perhaps they are for ourselves. A way for us to become in awe of God’s name which is already holy. A way for us to sync ourselves with God’s kingdom which is breaking out all around us. A way for us to nerve ourselves to do what we know is right – you’ll notice that the one petition Jesus highlights is the one about how we should forgive.

Let it be so with us: let us be God’s hand and feet, becoming what we pray for!

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