Lesson Six

Show Your Faith This Way—Not That Way

**Focal Text**
Matthew 6:1-18

**Background**
Matthew 6:1-18

**Main Idea**
Jesus calls for the kind of religious practices that seek God and God’s way rather than human applause and approval.

**Question to Explore**
What’s so bad about calling attention to one’s religious acts?

**Quick Read**
When we seek to honor God with our public and private spiritual practices, we glorify the Father and serve the world.

**Commentary**
*Tebowing* is one of the latest additions to the cultural dictionary. Tim Tebow, who is the son of missionaries, is now the quarterback of the Denver Broncos. He has sparked a national debate on the role of public faith in our society. He prays on the football field before games, points toward heaven when his team scores, and credits God for every success he experiences.

Some think his public demonstrations of faith are obtrusive and unwarranted. Others feel he has every right to express his commitment to Christ as long as he does not force his beliefs on others. Still others applaud his stand for Jesus as a model for all believers.
This debate is the latest example of a controversy that goes back to biblical times. When should we make our faith public? Why? How?

This week’s study will challenge us to find ways we can glorify God most effectively. John the Baptist’s testimony must be ours: “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30). How do we make Jesus “greater” by our public witness?

How to make faith public (6:1)

Our text begins: “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:1). Let’s understand the words Jesus employed, and then gather together their meaning for us.

“Be careful” translates prosechete, meaning to take heed, be alert, be concerned, pay careful attention to. “Not to do” could be translated not to perform. “Acts of righteousness” rendered dikaiosynen, referring here to very specific acts expected by the Judaism of Jesus’ day.

“To be seen by them” translates theaomai, from which we get theater. The word utilizes syntax that could be rendered, for the purpose of being seen by others. At issue is not whether people will know that we have done these “acts,” but whether we did them for that purpose. “Have” translates echete, meaning to hold, possess, experience. “Reward” translates misthon, meaning wages, pay, recompense.

We could translate his warning thus: Pay close attention to yourself, so that you do not perform your ‘acts of righteousness’ for the purpose of being seen by others. If you do, you will have absolutely no reward from your heavenly Father.

What were the “acts of righteousness” to which Jesus referred?

The Book of Tobit, an apocryphal volume, contains wisdom reflective of the Jewish culture of Jesus’ day. It counsels:

Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than wealth with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold. For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life, but those who commit sin and do wrong are their own worst enemies (Tobit 12:8-10, NRSV).

Alms, prayer, and fasting were widely affirmed in Judaism as three ways of demonstrating religious piety. In a moment we will study Jesus’ commentary on each.
First, however, it is critical that we understand the motives by which these acts should be performed.

Earlier Jesus enjoined us to “let your light shine before men” (Matt. 5:16a). Here he warns us about doing our “acts of righteousness” before men. Is this a contradiction? Not at all. Jesus’ earlier statement identifies the motive behind our public faith: “that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (5:16b). In our text, he did the same: “to be seen by them” (6:1), literally for the purpose of being seen by them.

At issue is the motive behind our actions. If we seek to honor God and serve others, our public acts of righteousness will be effective for both purposes. If we demonstrate our faith to impress others, we will fail to serve them or honor our Lord.

The prophets consistently warned the people against such hypocrisy:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
   I cannot stand your assemblies.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
   I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
   I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
   I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,

“The multitude of your sacrifices—
   what are they to me?” says the LORD.
“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
   of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
   in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
When you come to appear before me,
   who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
Stop bringing meaningless offerings!” (Isaiah 1:11-13).

With what shall I come before the LORD
   and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
   with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
   with ten thousand rivers of oil?

Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
    the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has showed you, O man, what is good.
    And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
    and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:6-8).

How can we be sure our motives are pure?

First, stay close to Jesus: “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). As we submit to the Spirit and commune with our Father, he molds our character in the image of his Son (Romans 8:29). Then we manifest the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23) and the humility that characterized our Savior (Philippians 2:5-11).

Second, ask the Lord to reveal and correct your motives whenever needed. David needed to ask God:

    Search me, O God, and know my heart;
    test me and know my anxious thoughts.
    See if there is any offensive way in me,
    and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23-24).

When last did you make his prayer yours?

**How to give (6:2-4)**
Now we turn to three illustrations of Jesus’ call to God-honoring motives. How should we give, pray, and fast in public?

Our first illustration: “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full” (Matt. 6:2).

**What to give**
“Give to the needy” translates poies eleemosynen, literally perform alms. In Jesus’ day there was no Social Security, food stamps, or other governmental subsistence for the needy. The Jewish people took care of their own through a variety of alms-giving programs. The Hebrew Bible required them to help the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10); land was to be left “unplowed and unused” every seven years for the benefit of those in need (Exodus 23:11).
This extended statement demonstrates the compassion they were to demonstrate toward all in need:

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: “The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,” so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:7-11).

One specific way the Jewish people cared for the poor in their midst was through a daily collection called the Tamhui (“Table,” the subject of Acts 6:1) and a Friday collection called the Kuppah (“Basket”). Almsgiving was so consistent in his culture that Jesus could say, “when you give to the needy. . . .” Like them, God expects us to care for the poor in tangible and practical ways.

Why to give

However, the motive behind such benevolence was a major issue in Jesus’ culture: “do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men” (Matt. 6:2) “Hypocrites” translates hypokrites, meaning actor, pretender. Greek actors wore masks to portray their characters. In addition, females were not typically allowed on stage, and so males wore feminine masks when playing women. A hypocrite was an actor who was adept at changing roles to suit the needs of the moment.

What was acceptable on the theatrical stage is disastrous in the family of God. Hypocrites in the church is one of the leading excuses offered by non-Christians when asked why they don’t attend worship services. God sees through our masks: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13). Jesus quoted Isaiah’s statement when condemning the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day (Matt. 15:1-11).

“Do not announce it with trumpets” (salpises, meaning to blow the trumpet) has been interpreted in various ways. Some suggest that Jesus had in mind the thirteen trumpet-shaped chests of the temple treasury (Luke 21:2), with the possibility that the hypocrites would throw their coins against them so others would know of their gifts. Others point to the blowing of trumpets in the streets to announce public fasts, and the possibility that the same was done on occasions of almsgiving.
However, there is no evidence in ancient Jewish writings of such conduct with regard to almsgiving. The hypocrites of Jesus’ day could certainly have engaged in such behavior without their acts being recorded by historians (who will note your class’s meeting this week?). But it may be that Jesus used this phrase metaphorically, in a fashion similar to our don’t honk your own horn.

By calling attention to their almsgiving “in the synagogues and on the streets,” they made sure that everyone in their community knew what they had given and they could be “honored by men.” If their strategy worked, it furnished the only reward for such hypocrisy: “I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full” (Matt. 6:2), literally they have already been paid all the wages they are going to get. The verb is common in ancient papyri for receiving a receipt—that is, they have their receipt in full.

By contrast, “when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (6:3). “You” is emphatic in the Greek. We can picture Jesus raising his voice and pointing his finger at his disciples. He expected them to “give to the needy” as did their contemporaries; they kept a moneybag for this purpose (John 13:29). However, their motive was to be very different from the hypocrites Jesus criticized.

They were not to “let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” The right hand was and is used publicly in the Middle East, while the left is kept at the side or hidden in one’s garment. Alms would typically be offered to others by the right hand. As the left hand could not see the right hand, so our gifts are to be private.

When we give

In this way, “your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matt. 6:4). “Secret” translates krypto, from which we get cryptic. It means to be hidden from others. What others do not see, our Father does: “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13). When we give to others out of a desire to glorify him rather than ourselves, he “will reward you” both now and in eternity.

Part of our Father’s reward is the communion and intimacy we experience when our hearts are right with him. It is the sense of well-being that comes from accomplishing our created purpose. And it is the knowledge that one day we will hear the most cherished words of all: “Come, you are who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matt. 25:34). This is not legalism. Altruism does not earn God’s favor. Rather it positions us to receive what God’s grace wants to give to all.
Does Jesus’ statement mean that all giving must be anonymous? Not at all. When church members contributed to the needs of others, they did so in a public forum: “Those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 4:34-35). Everyone in the early church knew that Barnabas had sold a piece of land and given the proceeds to the church (Acts 4:34-37). But Ananias and Sapphira soon illustrated the pitfall of following his example for the wrong reasons (Acts 5:1-11).

Have you given to those in need lately? for what reason? with what reward?

**How to pray (6:5-15)**

Jesus’ second illustration of ministry motivated by God’s glory and the good of others centers on prayer: “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full” (Matt. 6:5).

**Why to pray**

Again, Jesus assumed that we would pray: “when you pray . . .” The Jews of his day observed three specified times of daily prayer (see Psalm 55:17, “Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice”). The Shema was recited (Deuteronomy 6:4), followed by petitions, expressions of worship, and a plea for the Messiah to come. These petitions evolved into the Eighteen Benedictions (the Shemoneh Esreh) and were prayed in liturgical fashion.

Men were supposed to go to the synagogue or temple for these prayer times; if they could not be there in person, they were expected to pray wherever they were. As a result, Jesus spoke of those who “pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners.” During the hour of prayer, observant Jews would stop wherever they were to pray, even if they were on a “street corner.”

The problem was not that men prayed at these times—it was that they did so “to be seen by men.” “Standing” translates hestotes, which implies the practice of standing in position for a long time. “Street” translates plateion, a wide street where more people would see them. It seems that some hypocrites would arrange their days so they could be in the most visible places when the hours of prayer came. As with hypocritical almsgiving, their purpose was to glorify themselves rather than God and meet their needs rather than those of others. As with earlier hypocrites, they already “have received their reward in full.”

By contrast, Jesus taught his followers to “go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matt. 6:6). “Room” translates tameion, referring to a private chamber, inner room, closet, or storeroom. Its location is important only for the anonymity it confers.
As with almsgiving, Jesus did not mean that all public prayers are wrong. He prayed in the presence of his disciples (Luke 11:1) and when he blessed food before feeding the crowds (Matt. 14:19). Public prayers at the dedication of the temple (2 Chronicles 6:1-42) and for covenant renewal after the exile (Nehemiah 9:5-38) were both appropriate and effective. The disciples prayed publicly at the temple (Acts 3:1-10) and after Peter and John were released by the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:24).

Not only were some hypocritical by where they prayed—they demonstrated their hypocrisy by how they prayed: “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words” (Matt. 6:7). “Pagans” translates ἑθνικοὶ, meaning the heathen or unbelievers. Gentiles of Jesus’ day believed in a pantheon of gods, and were convinced that they could impress and persuade these gods by the length and fervency of their prayers.

Jesus did not mean that we could not repeat our prayers; he prayed three times in Gethsemane, “saying the same thing” (26:44). Rather, he spoke to the motives behind our prayers: “Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (6:8). We do not pray to inform an omniscient God of our needs, or to persuade an omnipotent God to meet them. Why pray, then? To position ourselves to receive what his grace intends to give.

When a child asks for his allowance, he does not inform or persuade his father. Rather, he draws near to the one who wants to give what he needs and more. Our loving Father longs to be gracious to us and rises to show us compassion (Isaiah 30:18). He wants to be with us more than we want to be with him.

When we pray to experience communion with the Almighty, not to impress others, we pray rightly. What motivated your last time of prayer?

What to pray
From motives, Jesus turned to methods for prayer. What follows is the most famous prayer of all time. Thousands of volumes have been written on it; I once taught a two-month series on its words and felt I only began to explore their significance. In the context of disciple-making, let’s focus on this prayer as a model for disciples.

It is not really the Lord’s Prayer, since it contains a petition for forgiveness that Jesus would never need to make (see Heb. 4:15). Neither are these words to be repeated in rote fashion as though they contained mystical and magical powers. If that were the case we could not pray them, as Jesus spoke them in Aramaic (Matthew translated them into the Greek we have today). He intended them as a model for us to follow. Let’s explore the principles they teach and find ways to apply them to our prayers today.
We begin with **worship**: “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name’” (Matt. 6:9). “Hallowed” translates hagiastheto, meaning *to consecrate, sanctify, reverence*. God’s “name” denotes his character and person. To pray that his “name” be “hallowed” is to ask that he be glorified and honored by our prayer and life.

The first element of transforming prayer is worship that honors our Father. We enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise (Psalm 100:4). As the Jews of Jesus’ day ascended the steps into the temple while reciting psalms of worship (Psalms 120—34, known as “Psalms of Ascent”), so we step into his presence with praise. Make time to reverence your Father. Sing or say psalms, hymns, or choruses to him. Praise him for who he is and thank him for what he has done in your life.

Second, we move to **submission**: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). As we noted in lesson 4, God’s kingdom is his rule and reign on earth. Jesus came to inaugurate this kingdom (Matt. 4:17); when he returns, he will consummate it (see Revelation 19:16). To pray for his kingdom to come is to submit to him as our King.

Transforming prayer requires that we surrender our words and lives to our Father. He can give only what we will receive, and lead only those who will follow. Submit your life and your day to your King, and know that he will lead you into his “good, pleasing, and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).

Third, we offer **petition**: “Give us today our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11). First-century Jews baked enough bread at the beginning of each day for that day’s needs. They had no means of preserving bread, and would not want to waste such a precious commodity. As bread was their basic staple, it stood symbolically for all needs. By asking for this day’s needs to be met, we surrender our problems to our Father’s providence and power. We name them specifically and place them in his hands. We do this when the day begins and through all that we experience. And we claim the fact that “my God will meet all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

Fourth, we move to **confession**: “Forgive us our debts” (Matt. 6:12a). “Debts” translates opheilemata, meaning *obligations, transgressions, sins*. It refers to that which we owe to God. (When Jesus taught the prayer again in Luke 11:4, he used hamartias, “sins.”) Our sins place us in his debt, for we can do nothing to repay or erase them. We can ask only that he “forgive,” translating *aphes*, meaning to *cancel, dismiss, pardon*. As when a governor pardons a criminal, so we ask God to pardon us—not to pretend that we did not sin, excuse our behavior, or ignore it, but to choose not to punish it.

Such forgiveness from God must be extended to others: “as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12b). As we are to love God and love our neighbor (22:37, 39), so we are to seek from God the pardon we give to others. We are the debtor who owed more than he could ever repay (18:23-27); those who have sinned against us are the debtor who owed very little (18:28-34).

As with our words, our actions do not earn God’s favor. Rather, when we forgive others we position ourselves to experience our Father’s forgiveness. If I am close to God, I cannot be distant from his children. In confession we admit our sins to the Lord and forgive those against us. Both lead to cleansing and renewal.

Fifth, we seek direction: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (6:13). “The evil one” translates ponerou, meaning wicked, evil, evil spirit, the wicked one. Jesus’ petition does not suggest that God would lead us into temptation unless we asked him not to do so. To the contrary, it exhibits the parallelism so common in first-century Jewish teaching. Rather than lead us into temptation, he will “deliver” (rhyomai, meaning preserve, save, rescue) from the one who would.

We must have such leadership if we would avoid sin and exalt Christ. God wants us to know his will more than we want to know it. When we seek his direction, we will always have it.

You are familiar with the customary benediction to the Model Prayer, “for yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.” While a good way to end our time of prayer, it is not part of the original text. Its inclusion arose when the prayer began to be recited liturgically in worship.

It may have been adapted from this remarkable prayer of praise by David:

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power
and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.

Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom;
you are exalted as head over all.

Wealth and honor come from you;
you are the ruler of all things.

In your hands are strength and power
to exalt and give strength to all.

Now, our God, we give you thanks,
and praise your glorious name (1 Chronicles 29:11-13).

When you pray (6:14-15)
The last section in Jesus’ teaching on prayer highlights the importance of forgiving others: “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also

forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt. 6:14-15).

Forgiving others is counseled repeatedly in Scripture. We are to forgive because we have been forgiven: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). We do so in gratitude for grace (Luke 7:42), on the basis of Jesus’ shed blood (Heb. 9:22).

Such forgiveness is to be extended every time it is needed (Luke 17:3-4; Matt. 18:21-22) as a means of restoring fellowship (2 Corinthians 2:7-10) and health (James 5:15-16). As Stephen (Acts 7:59-60) and Paul (2 Timothy 4:16) followed Jesus’ example of forgiveness (Luke 23:34), so should we.

When we pray for forgiveness, we must show others the reality of its experience in our lives. Who will know tomorrow that you offered this prayer to God today?

How to fast (6:16-18)

Jesus’ third illustration of the proper motives for ministry involved the common spiritual discipline of fasting: “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full” (Matt. 6:16).

“Fast” translates nesteuo, referring to the practice of abstaining from food for a spiritual purpose. This discipline has a long history in biblical revelation. Moses fasted while receiving the law from God (Exodus 34:28; Deut. 9:9). Fasts were proclaimed during times of emergency or distress (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Chron. 20:3; Ezra 8:21-23; Neh. 1:4; Esther 4:16; Jeremiah 36:9). Fasting often accompanied mourning (2 Samuel 1:12; 12:21) and prayer (2 Sam. 12:16; Psalm 35:13).

The tenth day of the seventh month, the Day of Atonement, was a required fast day for all Jews (Lev. 16:29). Fasts varied from an evening (Daniel 6:18), one day (1 Sam. 14:24; 2 Sam. 3:35), three days (Esther 4:16), seven days (1 Sam. 31:13; 2 Sam. 12:16-18), and forty days (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 9:9).

John the Baptist required his disciples to fast, as did the Pharisees (Matt. 9:14). Jesus fasted before his temptations (Matt. 4:2). Paul fasted after his Damascus Road encounter with Christ (Acts 9:9), before his first missionary journey (Acts 13:2-3), when choosing elders for the churches he established (Acts 14:23), and during a storm on the Mediterranean Sea (Acts 27:33).

Jesus assumed his followers would practice this discipline as well: “When you fast. . . .” As with the previous subjects, his concern was focused on motives rather than methods:
“do not look somber as the hypocrites do” (Matt. 6:16). “Somber” translates skythropos, meaning to be sad, gloomy. They “disfigure” (aphanizo, meaning to make unattractive or ugly) their faces “to show men they are fasting.” These hypocrites would wear old, torn clothes, cover themselves with ashes and dirt, and use makeup to appear sickly.

The Pharisees fasted on the second and fifth days of the week (see Luke 18:12), claiming that this was because they were the days when Moses made his trips to receive the law from God on Mount Sinai. However, they were also the major Jewish market days, when they would have the largest audiences for their pretension. Jesus warned his disciples that such hypocrites “have received their reward in full” (Matt. 6:16).

By contrast, “when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face” (6:17). “Put oil on your head” referred to using ointment or perfume to condition the hair and face. “Wash your face” contrasted with the dirt and ashes often worn by the hypocrites. In other words, look and act normally.

As a result, “it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (6:18). As with almsgiving and prayer, when we fast for the right reasons, our Father sees, is pleased, and rewards us now and eternally.

While fasting in Scripture is limited to food, I believe that this practice can relate effectively to a variety of other applications in our lives. Fasting is abstaining from the physical for the sake of the spiritual. Meals were time-consuming affairs in Jesus’ day; to spend this time in prayer and communion with God rather than in the company of others would strengthen a person’s relationship with the Father.

If Jesus were teaching the Sermon on the Mount today, would he suggest that we fast from other distractions as well? Would a fast from mobile phones, computers, television, and other electronics be helpful? Is there a time-consuming habit in your life that could be neglected today so you could focus on your Lord?

Conclusion
Which of the three illustrations in Matthew 6:2-18 is most relevant to your life and ministry today? Will the poor benefit from your study and teaching this week? Will your time alone with God be strengthened by following Jesus’ model and praying with proper motives? Will you abstain from the physical for the sake of the spiritual?

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