

Life with the Father

MATTHEW 6

AS JESUS CONTINUED His Sermon on the Mount, He presented an entirely different foundation for life. Hypocrites perform for public acclaim, and people who do not know God worry about their daily needs. But those of us who follow Christ live differently because we have a Father in heaven. We receive acclaim and reward—from our Father. Our needs and cares are attended to—by our Father. Therefore, we are free to devote ourselves to His concerns and forget our worries.

This week as you study, ask the Father, *Will You help me to really understand and experience how my life is different because You are present and caring for me?*

You'll benefit most from this study if you read the entire Scripture passage prayerfully before starting the questions. Some will be easier to answer than others. Please note the references of any verses you use. You don't need to say your "For personal thought" answers aloud in Core Group, though your responses may enrich others. Not everyone will get the same answer every time, and that's okay. Just ask God to help you understand His Word and equip you by it.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Day 1

Write God's Word for the week: Matthew 6:20-21.

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:1-4—Charitable Giving

1. According to Matthew 6:1, what do we lose if we practice acts of righteousness in order to be seen by other people?

2. What is the wrong way to give money to the needy? What is the right way? What heart motives do these different approaches reveal?

3. *For personal thought:* How could knowing that God sees, takes pleasure in, and rewards His children for deeds done His way affect the way you feel about serving Him?

4. Read the passages below. What do you learn from them about good works and rewards? What motivation do they offer you for your own giving?

a. 1 Corinthians 3:12-15

b. 2 Corinthians 5:10

c. Colossians 3:23-24

5. Contrast Matthew 6:3-4 and 5:16. What might be the reason for these differing instructions about letting others see our good works?

Day 2

STUDY QUESTIONS

Write God's Word for the week: Matthew 6:20-21.

Matthew 6:5-13—Prayer Examples

6. From Matthew 6:5-6, what is the wrong way to pray? What is the right way to pray? What heart motives do these different approaches reveal?

7. From Matthew 6:7-8, what did Jesus tell His disciples not to do when they prayed, and why?
8. If the Father knows what we need before we ask Him for it, why do you think He wants us to ask?
9. As you look at the model prayer recorded in Matthew 6:9-13, what basic elements do you notice that it includes (for example, forgiveness)?
10. Have you used this model for your own prayers? If so, what is it like for you?

Day 3

STUDY QUESTIONS

Write God's Word for the week: Matthew 6:20-21.

Matthew 6:14-18—Forgiveness and Fasting

11. What positive promise did Jesus give, according Matthew 6:14-15? What sober warning did He issue?
12. *For personal thought:* In view of Jesus's teaching and any other relevant Scripture passages you know, what would you say to the person who struggles to forgive?

13. How does the teaching about fasting echo Jesus’s earlier instructions about other acts of righteousness?

14. What are some reasons Christians might fast today?

Day 4

STUDY QUESTIONS

Write God’s Word for the week: Matthew 6:20-21.

Matthew 6:19-24—Treasures and Money

15. Where are we supposed to store up treasure? Why?

16. What types of actions here on earth do you think accumulate treasure for us in heaven?

17. When we don’t see an aspect of life clearly, what is the result, according to Matthew 6:22-23?

18. How do you think a love of money or things could affect our ability to see clearly?

19. *For personal thought:* List ways you see people serving money. Have you noticed yourself serving money in any of these ways? If so, in which ways?

20. Money is essential to our lives. What attitudes or actions do you think can help us handle money without serving it?

Day 5

STUDY QUESTIONS

Write God's Word for the week: Matthew 6:20-21.

Matthew 6:25-34—Anxiety over Needs

21. From Matthew 6:25, what did Jesus say about our attitudes concerning our daily needs?

22. From Matthew 6:26-32, what examples did Jesus give that enable us to see that God cares for His creation? How can reflecting on God's care for His creation help us to worry less and trust Him more?

23. What did Jesus say we are supposed to seek first? What did He promise will happen when we make this our priority?

24. *For personal thought:* Have you experienced God the Father providing basic needs for you? If so, describe your experience.

25. *Apply the truth:* What is one thing you worry about? Make notes about what it might look like for you to “seek first the kingdom of God” instead of acting out of anxiety. What would you stop doing? Start doing? Pick one action you can begin to practice this week.

Life with the Father

Matthew 6

As Jesus taught His disciples and the listening crowd, He continued to reveal what life is like in the kingdom of heaven compared with life as we usually experience it.

In the portion of the sermon recorded in Matthew 6, Jesus focused on how His followers are supposed to practice their righteous deeds, and He gave them an example of how to pray. Then He explained how He wants them to approach money and needs. In all these areas, life is different for His disciples because they have a Father in heaven who sees them, rewards them, and provides for them.

I. The Father's Reward (Matthew 6:1-18)

The first area of life Jesus addressed is how to practice righteous deeds. He again warned of doing right actions for wrong reasons—a theme He had developed earlier in His sermon. According to Jesus, people who do acts of righteousness because they want others to see them will have no reward from the Father in heaven.

This statement implies that people will receive a reward for what they do. Those who are doing righteous acts for show will receive exactly the reward they are looking for: public recognition. Those who do righteousness for God, who look only to

Him as their audience—no matter who else might also see—will receive a reward from Him.

As Jesus described what these differing motivations look like in real-life situations, He specifically called out the “hypocrites,” who were doing the right things for the wrong reasons. In the New Testament, the Greek word translated “hypocrite” appears only in Jesus’s teachings. The word was also used for an actor on a stage or, more generally, for people who disguise the truth about themselves. When Jesus used it (and we will see Him use it many more times in the book of Matthew), He was often talking to the scribes and Pharisees. For instance, He repeatedly called Israel’s leaders *hypocrites* in the woes we read in Matthew 23:13-29. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus critiqued the hypocrites’ approach to giving, praying, and fasting.

Giving. The first hypocritical habit Jesus dealt with is giving with great fanfare to the needy. He replaced this phony show of righteousness with His true practice: “When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret” (6:3-4). In His example about the right and left hands, Jesus used overstatement to stress the importance of keeping secret our charitable deeds. But our actions are never completely hidden. Those of us who follow Jesus have a Father “who sees in secret.” He always notices, and He will applaud and reward us.

Although we are supposed to give

—and do any other act of righteousness—solely for God, Jesus’s admonition to secrecy does not mean that no one will ever notice what we are doing. Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had told His disciples, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (5:16). This instruction points to an important distinction: Being noticed doing a righteous act is not the same as doing a righteous act *in order to* be noticed. The key differences are motivation and who gets the attention and glory.

Praying. The second hypocritical behavior Jesus addressed is praying that is done for show. He denounced those who love to pray in public so they can be heard—and admired. They may impress people with their feigned spirituality and with the words they use, but gaining others’ approval is the only reward these hypocrites will get.

How are the Father’s children supposed to pray instead? In secret and with God as the audience. Jesus was not throwing a blanket condemnation on praying aloud with others. Multiple examples in Acts show believers praying together (see 12:5; 13:1-3; 16:25; 20:36). Whatever the circumstances, God the Father is pleased when we truly talk with Him as if He really is present—because He is—and is seeing us and is listening to us; He is displeased when we use prayer to put on a religious show for others.

In addition to cautioning against the way religious hypocrites pray, Jesus also

warned about the Gentiles’ meaningless prayer practice of piling up “empty phrases” (Matt. 6:7). The Gentiles usually practiced pagan religions. People involved in such religions often use thoughtless repetitions in their prayers. They might do so because they presume that their deity does not hear quickly or because they think that a sheer volume of words might somehow produce an effect (see 1 Kgs. 18:25-29).

God the Father is pleased when we truly talk with Him as if He really is present—because He is!

But prayer to the God of the Bible is different. Jesus assured His followers that their Father knows what they need, even before they ask Him for it. If we are His children, we do not have to work to get His attention. Nor do we need to flood Him with words so He knows we are serious. God does not want us to approach Him in these ways, but He does want us to talk with Him about our needs and desires. Although He already knows all of these things, asking Him for them grows our relationship with Him, primes us to look for His response, builds our expectation of it, and keeps us tuned to Him as the one who is personally providing everything we need.

We can even ask God for the same thing over and over. In fact, He invites us to do so (see Lk. 18:1-8). Therefore, heaping up meaningless words should

not be confused with intense, persistent prayer. It should also not be confused with using prayers that others have written. Again, God is primarily concerned with the heart motivations that lie behind the words we are using.

To demonstrate how to pray in a way that pleases the Father, Jesus gave an example. The model prayer He presented—often called *the Lord's Prayer*—trains us to talk simply and easily with God about what is really important. This prayer has a number of elements (see Matt. 6:9-13):

- Reverence and relationship: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” This opening exalts God. “Heaven” reminds us of His high position, and “hallowed” means “set apart” or “holy.” But this first phrase also highlights God’s nearness. It contains a powerful truth that Christians may find so familiar that they overlook it. When those of us who have trusted in Jesus pray, we are talking to someone with whom we have a very close relationship. Addressing God as Father is intimate; it is perhaps even awkward for those who are unaccustomed to interacting with God on such personal terms. With this prayer, Jesus opened the door for His followers to relate with God as Father the way Jesus Himself does.



Think about what addressing God as *our Father* means to you. Often, our perception of earthly fathers colors our understanding of

God the Father. For some, the word *father* might evoke thoughts of a strong, dependable, loving provider. But for others, *father* may evoke memories of abuse, abandonment, indifference, or hurt.

When Jesus said to pray to “our Father” (Matt. 6:9), He was illustrating an intimate relationship with one who truly loves His children (see 1 Jn. 4:15-16), who will never leave or forsake them (see Heb. 13:5), and who always acts in their best interests (see Rom. 8:28). Unlike human fathers, who can fail their children, God is a trustworthy Father who notices us and provides what we need. We can feel safe with Him.

- Orientation to God’s priorities and purposes: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). This part of the prayer asks for the kingdom of heaven to be manifest in our daily lives, right in the middle of our concerns. Jesus wants us to seek for God’s good will. He wants us to long to see God’s pleasure played out in our earthly relationships and situations as fully as it is in heaven, where God already rules completely.
- Attention to everyday needs: “Give us this day our daily bread.” This petition for bread implies that the exalted God of heaven truly is a Father who knows what His children need and who provides for them. Such an ordinary request for daily food also suggests

that the Lord's Prayer is a model we can use each day.

- Restoration from sin: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Our sins leave us in spiritual debt to God (see Col. 2:14). Even after we have trusted in Christ for salvation and God has declared us righteous, the sins we commit impede our relationship with Him. We need to be cleansed from them and restored in our fellowship with God (see 1 Jn. 1:6-9).

God also wants us to release others from the sin-debt they owe us. In fact, the Lord's Prayer indicates that the forgiveness we receive correlates with the forgiveness we extend to others. Jesus elaborated on this idea after the prayer. "For if you forgive others their trespasses," He explained, "your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14-15; see also 18:21-35). The Father in heaven generously offers forgiveness to us. Who are we, then, to harden our hearts and refuse to forgive others? If we live in His kingdom, we are simply not free to nurture grudges. Forgiving others can be a long and difficult process, but the Father calls us to take on His characteristics and seek to do as He does.

- Deliverance from testing, trials, and evil: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (6:13). The word

for "temptation" means "a trial, a testing, or a temptation." The book of James teaches us that God does not tempt anyone to do evil but that He does allow trials that test our faith (see 1:2-3, 12-13). Asking God not to lead us into temptation probably means imploring the Father to intervene and keep us from testing and trials where we may be tempted to sin. Jesus combined this request with a prayer to be delivered from evil, or "the evil one" (6:13, NIV), referring to Satan and his schemes against us.¹

Our Father in heaven generously offers forgiveness to us. If we live in His kingdom, we are simply not free to nurture grudges.

Fasting. After Jesus finished talking about prayer, He focused on a third hypocritical practice: fasting to be seen by others. Hypocrites fast for the same reason they give and pray: to "be seen by others." And, as with giving and praying, when these showy "fasters" receive others' admiration, they have the only reward they are looking for and will receive.

But Jesus wants His followers to take a different approach. He told His listeners that instead of looking gloomy in order to display their physical discomfort, they are supposed to "anoint" their heads and wash their faces—actions that show they

are preparing to take pleasure in life—so that people around them cannot tell that they are fasting.

Jesus's point is clear. Fasting is not supposed to be about other people. If we follow Jesus, then it is really an interaction between us—either as an individual or as a group of Christians who are fasting together—and our Father. When we abstain from food—or any other creature comfort that we could go without for a time—we are demonstrating that we desire something *more* than what we have temporarily given up. Perhaps we want to see God work in our own heart and life, or perhaps we long to see Him act in our church, our community, our nation, or the world. Through fasting, we are also acknowledging that the thing we are going without is not ultimately what sustains us and meets our needs—God is.



Think about fasting. After the Gospels, the rest of the New Testament hardly mentions the practice, yet Jesus assumed that His followers would fast. He said, “when you fast,” not, “if you fast.” In other passages, fasting is associated with prayer and seeking God (see, for example, Acts 13:2-3).

When we interrupt our normal eating and allow ourselves to feel physical hunger, deeper hungers are often uncovered. Thoughts and attitudes that otherwise can stay submerged beneath the normal rhythms of life have space to

surface. Our bodily hunger can remind us of our heart hunger. A heart that longs for God, that wants Jesus more than food—or whatever else we've chosen to abstain from—is a heart that delights God.

Jesus's three examples about how to do good deeds all focus on our heart motivations. As followers of Christ, we are not in the “kingdom of humans,” where we seek rewards from other people. Rather, we are in the kingdom of heaven, where we have a Father in heaven who sees and rewards us. Jesus's words call us to live in keen awareness of our heavenly Father and do everything for Him.

II. True Treasure (Matthew 6:19-24)

Jesus continued His message by talking about how our relationship with money and possessions is very different in God's kingdom. He spoke first about accumulating wealth and then addressed the worry of not having enough.

In His teaching, Jesus assumed that His disciples would want to accumulate treasure and wealth. But He commanded a key difference in where they store their treasure: they are supposed to accumulate treasure in heaven, not on earth. Obviously, if we typically think of treasure as material goods, then Jesus's words about storing up treasures in heaven mean we must radically redefine what constitutes treasure. Instead of money and things, we are supposed to value what brings reward in God's kingdom.

In addition to causing listeners to reexamine their ideas about what treasure is, Jesus's instructions also would have challenged Jews to rethink what earthly riches said about a person's standing with God. Jews often viewed great material wealth as a sign of God's blessing and favor. But Jesus taught that the treasures of this world have little value compared with the treasures of heaven. This teaching astonished His followers, as the account of the rich young man shows (see 19:21-25).

Why should we seek heavenly rather than earthly treasures? One reason, Jesus pointed out, is that earthly treasures are unreliable. Moth, rust, and thieves—not to mention inflation, natural disasters, stock-market collapses, and economic downturns—can easily ruin anything we manage to accumulate in this life. Heavenly treasure, however, is eternally secure.

The matter of money and belongings is not only about future rewards, though. The present is also at stake. Like the topics of anger, lust, and retaliation that Jesus had addressed earlier in His sermon, the subject of treasure goes straight to the heart: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (6:21). The pulls of our hearts determine the courses of lives. What we prize most we direct our thoughts, calendars, and resources toward.

Jesus used the example of an eye to illustrate the importance of having a clear perspective on earthly riches. A healthy eye, He said, results in a body that is full of light, but an unhealthy eye leaves the whole body in darkness. Likewise, an outlook on life that treasures things of

eternal value brings goodness and truth into everything a person is and does, but a view that prioritizes objects and money corrupts one's entire being.

The consequences of treasuring earthly wealth are so serious that Jesus equated coveting and greed to slavery: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." With such strong statements about love and hate, devotion and despising, Jesus leaves no middle ground. Either money is our god, or God Almighty is. We can serve only one. We cannot fool ourselves by claiming only a little devotion to money or a little love for money.



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Think about what it means to serve money. Jesus compared loving money to serving it as a master and being devoted to it. If we love our stuff and money, we are, in essence, saying to money, "I will devote my life to you. I will serve you with my time and energy. I will always take you into account when I make decisions, and I will do whatever you tell me to do." These are words we should reserve for God alone.
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III. Kingdom Provision (Matthew 6:25-34)

Serving God instead of money has profound implications for how we approach

pressing daily needs. Jesus addressed this topic next in His sermon. He told His disciples not to be anxious about the basics of life, such as food, drink, or clothing. He did not deny that His followers needed these things, but He said to stop fretting about them.

If God the Father cares for birds, how much more will He care for what is infinitely more valuable to Him—His children?

To show why His disciples do not need to worry about life's necessities, particularly food, Jesus used birds as an illustration: "The birds of the air ... neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" Jesus expected the answer to be a resounding yes. If God the Father cares for birds, Jesus was implying, how much more will He care for what is infinitely more valuable to Him—His children?

To underscore the futility of worry, Jesus pointed out that it cannot add an hour to anyone's life. Worrying is mentally spinning our wheels—it takes lots of time and mental energy but produces no practical result.

Jesus then talked about clothing, yet another common concern of everyday life. Again, He used an example from nature that shows God as both creator and sustainer. Simple wildflowers, Jesus said, are clothed far better than wealthy King Solomon was. Jesus's point was that if God

provides in such a way for plants that quickly wither and die, then He will provide even more faithfully for His beloved children.

Jesus implied that His followers worry because they are "of little faith." The New Testament records only Jesus using this phrase. It could literally be translated, "you little faiths." The idea is not that the disciples were mired in unbelief or doubt but that their faith was small when it came to relying on God. In telling them not to worry about basic necessities, Jesus was asking them to begin living the life of big faith.

Jesus challenged His disciples further by comparing their anxiety over food, drink, and clothing to the mentality of pagan Gentiles, who "seek after all these things." This comparison must have been a shock. The Jews considered Gentiles unclean and avoided interacting with them (see Acts 10:28). Earlier, Jesus had suggested that His followers were acting like despised tax collectors rather than like God (see Matt. 5:46), and here Jesus brought in an equally loathed class—Gentiles—to make a similar point. In worrying about physical necessities, the disciples, who knew God, were living like those who did not know Him.

But life works differently in the kingdom of heaven. Unlike people around them, Jesus's followers do not have to worry about food or clothing because their heavenly Father knows that they need those things. Instead of pursuing physical needs, Jesus's disciples are free to "seek first the kingdom of God and

his righteousness” (6:33). Jesus promised that when they do, God will supply life’s necessities.

To live this way, caring about what God cares about and trusting Him to provide what we need, requires that we really act as if we have a Father who sees us, pays attention to us, and shows generosity and goodness toward us. Jesus was saying, in essence, “Live as if the Father is who I say He is.”

Jesus summed up His teaching on anxiety with these words: “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” The word *tomorrow* may refer to the next day’s needs of food and clothing, or it may refer to whatever may happen the next day. In saying that tomorrow will be anxious for itself and that each day has enough trouble of its own, Jesus used wry humor as He called His people to let go of anxiety over the future and to let the Father deal with whatever may lie ahead.



Think about Jesus’s powerfully radical instructions to stop worrying about food, clothes, treasures, and our life spans. These instructions speak to some of our most basic questions: How can I get

what I need to survive? How can I look good? How can I get even more stuff and hang on to it? How can I live longer? Just as He did with the Beatitudes, Jesus turns our understanding of those concerns upside down. Here is the exchange He offers: If you channel all that mental energy toward treasuring your heavenly Father and what matters to Him, He will see to it that you have what you need. Bank on it, live for Him, and trust Him to take care of tomorrow.

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As Jesus talked about acts of righteousness, money, and basic needs, He emphasized ways His followers are supposed to live differently because they have a Father in heaven. Like the people who first heard His message, those of us who follow Christ today also behave like hypocrites and pagans if we seek others’ approval instead of God’s, pile up meaningless words as we pray, or fret about how we are going to provide for ourselves. In all of these actions, we are living as if we do not have a loving, involved heavenly Father who hears us, rewards us, feeds us, and clothes us. But Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount invites us to abandon our old ways and experience life in the Father’s care.

Endnote

1. Many Christians learned a version of the Lord’s Prayer that is based on the King James translation of the Bible. There, the prayer concludes, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.” You may notice that your Bible does not include these familiar words. They are omitted because after the King James Version was translated, additional ancient manuscripts of the book of Matthew were discovered. These manuscripts, which many scholars consider to be more reliable, do not include those final words in the Lord’s Prayer.



Personalize the truth. Spend some time in prayer adapting and personalizing Jesus's model from Matthew 6:9-13. You may find the following example helpful.

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."

God, how do You want me to experience You as Father in this area?

What would it look like for Your name to be shown as holy in this situation?



REVIEW

Day 7

Life with the Father

Write God's Word for the week: Matthew 6:20-21.

26. Has this lesson affected your attitude toward material needs? If so, what stood out to you from the questions, discussion, or Commentary?