

Small Group Leader Notes

Matthew 6:1-18

Context

- **The Beatitudes** - Although chapter 6 marks a new section in Jesus' sermon it is all one sermon. In the Beatitudes (5:1-12) Jesus was inviting us to decide whose blessing and approval we would seek. Would we seek the passing approval and blessing of people or would we choose the eternal approval and kingdom blessings of God. Now in 6:1-18 we are being asked whether we will seek the approval of people or God.
- **Be perfect (5:48)... Be Careful (6:1)** - There is another connection between chapters 5 and 6. Jesus summarised his teaching in 5:21-48 with the command 'Be perfect...' (5:48.) He then immediately moves on to issue another command 'Be careful...' (6:1.) What is the link between these two commands? *"It almost seems as if the greater the demand for holiness, the greater the opportunity for hypocrisy."* (Carson.)
- **Contrasting Communities** - In chapter 6 Jesus wishes to show his new community of disciples that they must live differently to other communities around them. In 6:1-18 the primary contrast is with religious hypocrites (v2, v5, v16.) Then in 6:19-34 the contrast is with the pagans (6:32, notice also 6:7.) Here again we find echoes of what has gone before in ch5. The church is the salt and light of the world (5:13-16, we are to be visibly distinctive in how we live. We are not to be like everyone else.

Structure

The Big Idea... (v1)

...Applied to Giving (v2-4)

Don't be like the hypocrites... (v2)

... Because they have already received their reward (v2)

But instead... (v3)

... So that your Heavenly Father will reward you (v4)

... Applied to Prayer (v5-15)

Don't be like the hypocrites... (v5)

... Because they have already received their reward (v2)

But instead... (v6)

Don't be like the pagans... (v7-8)

But instead... (v9-13)

... So that your Heavenly Father will forgive you
(v14-15)

... Applied to Fasting (v16-18)

Don't be like the hypocrites... (v16)

... Because they have already received their reward (v16)

But instead... (v17)

... So that your Heavenly Father will reward you (v18)

Laying out the structure like this helps to see the repetitive structure that Jesus is using. It also helps us to notice the points at which he deviates from the structure in the section on prayer;

- In v7 he tells us not to be like the pagans rather than the hypocrites - is this significant?
- He also gives much more detail on how we should pray (v9-13) than in any of the other sections (v3, v6, and v17.) Why do you think this is?
- This structure also helps us to notice that in v14-15 Jesus says that our Heavenly Father will forgive us if we do what he says. This is different from the other sections where Jesus promises that our Heavenly Father will reward us if we do what Jesus says (v4, v6, v18.) Again, why do you think this is? Does this help us to understand what Jesus means by reward? Should we equate our Heavenly Father's reward with his forgiveness?

Tricky Bits

- **What are these ‘rewards’?**
 - The idea of reward occurs several times in Matthew’s gospel (see 5:11-12.) We shouldn’t read this as something that we earn like a wage. Instead these rewards are “a freely given recompense, out of all proportion to the service (19:29; 25:21, 23)” (French.)
 - Try not to get bogged down in exactly what these mean. The important point to see is the contrast between the reward of the hypocrite who merely receives the applause of the crowd, versus the one who receives the reward of their Heavenly Father.
- ***Is Jesus saying that we should never pray in public?***
 - Here is one of those cases where we must read this passage in the context of the rest of the gospel and the rest of the New Testament. Jesus prayed publicly (e.g. John 11:41-42) and the early church met together to pray (e.g. Acts 1:14, 2:42, 4:24.) Jesus therefore cannot be forbidding all public prayer and prayer meetings. We need to read the verses carefully. Notice the motivation of the hypocrites in v5, “to be seen by others.” Jesus is therefore not forbidding public prayer in general but public prayer that is more concerned with impressing other people rather than bringing requests to God.
 - When Jesus tells us to go and pray privately he is not saying that this is the only place where we can pray. What he is saying is that our public prayer is to be a small and true reflection of our private prayer. Just look at Jesus’ prayer life to see this principle in action. He certainly did pray publicly but he spent much more time praying privately. Public prayer is to be an overflow of private prayer. This raises questions like, ‘Do you pray differently in public to private?’ ‘Do you only pray in public and not in private?’
- **What about the doxology at the end of the Lord’s Prayer?**
 - The NIV has the words, ‘for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen.’ in a footnote. These words appear to have been added towards the end of the late second century. Whilst it is true that the kingdom, power and glory belong to our Heavenly Father it seems doubtful that Jesus actually taught that this should be part of this model prayer.
- **Do we have to earn our forgiveness?**
 - Is this some sort of tit-for-tat arrangement where God will only forgive me after I have forgiven you? Again we must not read this passage in isolation but instead read it in the context of the gospel and the rest of the New Testament. Jesus’ parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21-35 is worth reading at this point. In the parable the order of forgiveness is not what is emphasised. Jesus is not teaching that X must forgive Y before Z can forgive Y. Instead the parable and Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6 focuses on attitude. There is no forgiveness for the person who doesn’t forgive. Someone who is not prepared to forgive shows that they have not yet truly repented and received God’s forgiveness. See back to 5:7 for more on this.
- **What is fasting? How and when should we do it?**
 - In Jesus’ day there were prescribed days in the Jewish calendar when everyone would fast. These were associated with major feasts. People would also fast at times of great nation need such as when the autumn rain didn’t come. Individuals would also fast as signs of their deep repentance before God and at times of particular

prayer. Whilst Jesus clearly expected his followers to fast he also defended them for not fasting (9:14-17.)

- What Jesus is stressing in these verses is that if and when we fast we are to do so in such a way that others do not know that we are fasting. Tragically it what can start out as a humble act of devotion to God can become an act of pride in front of others. The principle that Jesus is teaching in this section applies beyond these three examples. For instance, when we choose how to dress for church, who are we doing it for? If we make a special effort is it to impress other people or is it out of reverence for God?

Big Idea - Jesus states the big idea in v1. This is the summary and headline application for the whole passage. Putting it in our own words we might say;

‘Do everything for your Heavenly Father’s approval not for other people’s approval.’

Applications

- **Be careful not to be a hypocrite**
 - This is the big application. All the other applications listed below are really different branches coming off this main trunk of application. This application is not limited to the three examples that Jesus gives. v1 makes it clear that it applies to all our righteous acts so it includes our church attendance, our singing, how we dress for church, how we preach and teach, how we serve coffee, how we lead Bible studies and how we contribute to Bible studies.
 - In what ways can we be in danger of being religious hypocrites? Are we in danger of play acting? Are we one thing in private and another thing in public? Do we do things for the approval of others?
- **Take the plank out your own eye first**
 - There is a real danger in a passage like this that we see all the ways that everyone else is being hypocritical but refuse to address our own hypocrisy. The principle of 7:1-5 apply here. Try to avoid giving examples of other people being hypocrites. If you are going to give examples it is best if they are examples of your own hypocrisy.
- **Give generously and secretly to please your Heavenly Father**
 - Our giving is to be done secretly so as to avoid the temptation of doing it to impress other people. Yet we are also to give generously to please God. You might find it helpful to quickly review 2 Corinthians 8-9 which lays out some further principles of giving.
 - The danger in talking about giving is that it can become an opportunity to show off about how much we give. Again it is important for you as the leader to lead the discussion in such a way as to help people avoid falling into this trap.
- **Cultivate a life of private prayer out of which public prayer can flow**

- The challenge here is to be consistent in our prayer life. You might want to spend time talking as a group about the things that you can do or use that people find helpful for praying on their own in private.
- **Let Jesus' model of prayer shape the kind of prayers that we pray**
 - It's worth comparing the prayers that you pray as a home group (and as individuals) with the shape of Jesus' model. How much time do we spend praying for physical needs compared to spiritual needs? How much time do we spend in confession and asking for forgiveness? How much of our prayers are taken up with God's glory rather than our circumstances?
- **Consider when it would be appropriate for you to fast for a period**
 - We want to avoid being legalistic about this but at the same time we should encourage people to consider when it would be appropriate to quietly and privately give themselves to a time of fasting and prayer.
 - Again we need to beware of encouraging people to try and impress others with their piety.

Questions

Starter - This passage is all about religious hypocrisy. Why do you think hypocrisy is so dangerous for churches?

This question is just trying to get the ball rolling in the right direction of thinking about the danger of hypocrisy.

1. According to Jesus why do hypocrites give, pray and fast? What is their motivation?

The key verses here are v1, v2, v5 and v16 - notice how in all of these the motivation is to be seen/honoured by others. They are not doing these things for God, they are doing them for themselves and their own reputation. They're taking things that should be marked by humility and turning into opportunities for self-exaltation.

- What is their reward?

They get people's approval, recognition and honour which is what they wanted... but that is all they get. Human recognition is fleeting so it is hardly much of a reward.

Having considered the hypocrites we now want to consider how we are to be different in each of these areas. You might not have time to think in depth about prayer, giving and fasting. You may need to choose to focus on one or two so as to apply them thoroughly rather than superficially covering all of them.

As Jesus' followers what should motivate our giving?

In short - God's approval not other people's. You might want to draw in other passages on giving to expand on this. For example 2 Corinthians 8-9 show us that our giving is to be motivated by thankfulness to God.

- How should we give?

We should give privately rather than drawing attention to ourselves. We should also give generously, joyfully (again see 2 Corinthians 8-9) and sacrificially (2 Corinthians 8:2-3 and Luke 21:1-4.)

You could take the opportunity to talk about the ways that people give at BEC as some might not be aware of the opportunity to give at communion services, in the offering box each week or by standing order. If people would like to start a standing order they should speak to Charles Mitchell (Treasurer.)

2. How should we pray?

Again we're not to do it for people's approval. We're not to babble on in public but rather we are to pray simply and privately.

This might open up all sorts of conversations about church prayer meetings and private prayer. Jesus isn't saying that it's wrong to pray in public, but we're not to be hypocrites who only pray when other people are watching and who never pray in private.

- What sort of things should we pray for?

We don't have time to do an in-depth study of v9-13 (we will have spent more time on this in the sermon.) In your study try to help the group see the shape and the priorities in

Jesus' prayer. Notice the emphasis on God's glory and kingdom, our sin and temptation not just our physical needs.

- **Think about your recent times of prayer as a home group. How do they compare with the shape of Jesus' pray?**

You could jot down the things that you've prayed for to help you compare your priorities with Jesus'. Think about how you could pray for the same people and situations whilst praying for Jesus' priorities? For example instead of just praying for someone's difficult work situation you could pray that God would help them to hallow God's name at work and asking that he would keep them from being tempted to get angry.

3. When might it be right and appropriate to fast?

You might need to help the group to understand that fasting usually goes with times of particularly intense prayer.

- **How should we go about fasting?**

This question is here just to make remind us of the principle. If we fast it shouldn't be so that we are seen by others. If we fast others shouldn't be aware. This is something between us and God.

4. Can you think of other situations where we can be in danger of hypocrisy?

I think it is well worth making sure that you have time for this question as it might open up all sorts of possible areas of application. You might want to talk about serving at church, singing or even taking part in a Bible study.

Be careful that it doesn't turn into an opportunity to point out the speck of sawdust in other people's eyes.

- **How would the principles of this passage apply?**

For each situation you have thought of spend time thinking what it would like to 'practice our righteousness' before God and not other people? What would it look like to do this consistently?