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Almsgiving, God's Giving, Forgiving, Thanksgiving (Matthew 6)

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Jesus presents the form of religious practice that should characterize his disciples.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the seventh in my series on the Gospel of Matthew. Today we're looking at chapter six of the Gospel, which is the central chapter of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount, as we've already discussed, is a highly structured speech.

It is the first of the five great speeches that Jesus gives in the Gospel of Matthew. It really sets out his agenda for his mission, for his people, what it means to be part of the Kingdom of God. The very beginning of it starts with some blessings, which are mirrored then in the woes of chapter 23 of the book, but then also in warnings at the end of the Sermon on the Mount.

So there are blessings in the Beatitudes and then warnings at the end. There are statements concerning the fulfilling of the law and the prophets at both ends. And then there are double triads at both ends after that, within that.

So there's triads concerning the fulfilling of the law and then social relations. And then at the very heart, there's a triad concerning the form of piety, religious practice, that should be practiced by the disciples of Christ. Now, Christ, as he's going through this, is teaching what it means to be a city set on a hill, what it means to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

He's teaching what it means that he is not abolishing the law, but fulfilling it. And particularly within the previous chapter, he's discussed the way in which his disciples fulfill the law by a sort of practice that is not driven by a narrow avoidance practice, avoiding sinning, but is driven by a positive, fulfilling practice, the transforming initiative of forming peace, peacemaking, of reconciliation, of breaking vendettas before they even get started, of those who avoid the whole dynamics that fuel sin and tackle sin at its very root. Now, as Jesus is going through, he has a number of different points that he treats.

So first of all, he starts with the law. Then at the end, he moves on to social relations. And in this middle part, he's concerned with the sort of piety and religious practice that his disciples should follow.

And there's a repeated contrast here. The foil for the disciples' practice is primarily the hypocrites. Now, the hypocrites, that's language taken from the theatre originally.

These are actors, people who are pretending to be something that they're not. And in Jesus' teaching, it's primarily that they are acting to be seen by men. And so it's already language that's been used within Jewish context to refer to a sort of moral pretense.

And Jesus is taking it and using it in a very similar sense here. The hypocrites are hypocrites because they are ungodly, yet trying to project an image of themselves as godly to other men. Now, the point is that they're concerned with the praise of other men.

So they're trying to act for the sake of others, rather than for the sake of God. They give little concern to God's judgement, but they really care about what others think about them. And as Peter Lighthouse has observed, though, Jesus is very concerned with

motivation, but his instructions are not in the realm of motivation.

Jesus does not usually say, avoid bad motives. Don't be angry. Now, you do have that, sort of be angry and do not sin.

Jesus does address the motive of anger in such places. But generally, what Jesus' teaching is, is concrete and specific directions and approaches to action. And so the change in our manner of action will impact our motivations, but it's not directly aimed at our motivations.

Note that those sorts of calls to concrete change of action are far harder to dodge than the challenges to our motivations alone. We're practised at denying and assembling our motivations to ourselves, saying that we're not really about the things that we're really about, that we're good at denying that we're really motivated by the things that we are motivated by. And sometimes the best way to smoke out our true motivations is to starve bad motivations, to put us in a position where they're no longer being fed.

And how are motivations fed? Generally by patterns of action. Or through those patterns of action that they're getting fed by praise of other people, by money, by whatever it is. And so Jesus deals with those because through those you expose the problems of the heart and you can also address the problems of the heart in a far more effective way.

Now, just paying attention to the sort of teaching that Jesus is giving here, we should see some sort of affinity between it and the wisdom teaching that we have in the Old Testament. It's based upon a deep understanding of how human beings work. So it's not a teaching that's just do this, don't do that.

Nor is it a teaching of avoid bad motivations. It's a teaching that is very astute in its observation of how human beings work. And it gets at the very root of the problem in an indirect way.

And so Jesus recognises that those who desire the praise of men are driven by that desire and that motivation to pursue particular forms of practice. They want other people to see what they are doing. And so they broadcast or even trumpet their righteousness before men.

Jesus is probably using hyperbole here where he talks about blowing a trumpet before them as they're giving their gifts. But the point is that they want other people to see. It's very important that this registers with other people because if it doesn't, what's the point? And so by forbidding the broadcasting, the motivation itself is starved.

If you're having to do all of this stuff in secret and no one's seeing, then if you're going for the praise of men, that's not going to be given to you. There's no praise to be found if it's not broadcast. And often we're practiced at broadcasting in a way that even veils the fact that we are broadcasting it.

We don't want people to know that we are intending them to see what we are doing. But it is very important to us that they see what we are doing. By instructing his disciples then to pursue their righteousness in secret, the conditions are created for the nurturing of different motivations.

Because if you're doing all this in secret, what's the purpose that you're doing it for? Not the praise of man, but the praise of God. And the more that you're invested in that sort of practice, the more invested you will be in the praise of God. Now this is a very deep insight into human psychology.

We'll get into this a bit more as we go through the chapter. But Jesus is using wisdom principles to address what it means to fulfil the law. Now that's not something that's new to the New Testament.

Within the Old Testament we already have wisdom being applied to the law and meditating upon the law, its ways, and thinking about how you can internalise the law and its principles. And you do that in part through the application of wisdom to human psychology and action and recognising what makes us tick. Why do we react in the way that we do? Why are we motivated in the way that we're motivated? How can you start to change those motivations? And that's the sort of endeavour that Jesus is teaching here.

Jesus is not generally focused upon disputing his contemporaries' understanding of the content of ethical practice. So Jesus' teaching here is not saying the scribes and Pharisees are teaching that you should do this, you shouldn't do that, you should do this instead in terms of the content of ethical practice. They're agreed on you shall not murder, they're agreed on not committing adultery, they're agreed on giving gifts to the poor, they're agreed on praying and fasting.

What the point of the difference is in the manner in which these things are done. It's in the hypocritical behaviour and the manner of the piety of the scribes and the Pharisees. So on the surface they're committed to all the right things, all the right practices, all the right convictions.

They hold the commandments in principle as authoritative but in their actual lives they're undermining it. First of all by their hypocrisy and then also by the way that they are papering over the motivations that are left unaddressed within them. And so Jesus is very clear that we need to get at the root of these problems.

But we get at the root of the problems often by addressing our practice first. Now this chapter again continues to operate with triadic structures. I've already remarked upon Dale Allison's identification of the triadic structures within the Sermon on the Mount.

So he talks about the Beatitudes at the beginning, that there's a triadic structure there.

He argues that there are nine and there are eight and then there's one appended to the eighth that unpacks it and relates it to individual persons or the persons who are hearing more directly in the second person. I'm not so sure about that particular triad but beyond that I think there are triadic structures to be observed.

And so there is a double triad and then there is a single triad which we have in this section which concerns religious practice. And then there's a double triad that follows concerning social relations. And so there are three sets of teachings.

There's a double triad, a single triad and then a double triad again. And the triadic logic that Glenn Stassen has observed also continues here. So the triadic logic is a different thing from the triadic literary structure.

It's the triadic logic of the traditional teaching or practice, the vicious cycle or the problem that needs to be addressed. And then finally the way in which that can be addressed through transformative practice or through a transforming initiative. And so that cycle continues here.

Often it's implicit. Things aren't spelled out step by step. Sometimes the steps will be reversed but it's the logic that lies beneath it.

So Jesus presents a traditional teaching or practice giving of gifts to the poor for instance. Then the vicious cycle that people who are giving the gifts to the poor to be recognised by other men, they've received their reward already. And what's the transforming practice? You do these things in secret.

So the whole triadic structure continues and the same logic is being applied. Jesus is not just trying to put things into the heart and penetrate to a level that shows that we just cannot obey and hold the law up to such a high level that we just see our sinfulness and guilt. That's not the purpose here.

The purpose is transforming practice. This is going to be expressed in a different form of life, in a way of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus takes for granted that his disciples will be practising almsgiving, prayer and fasting.

This will be part of their continued practice. That's assumed. The assumption is that as people rooted within the Jewish religious tradition, these are core practices.

You can't just dispense with these. And yet Jesus addresses the problems with these practices as they're commonly performed. So the first one that he focuses upon is in the opening verses.

It's the giving of gifts to the needy. And so Jesus describes a hyperbolic situation perhaps where almsgivers sound trumpets before them as they're going out into the streets. They want to broadcast their practice to be seen and praised by others.

And the problem is they get their reward but it's a paltry one. It's a very small reward to get. The praise of men is fleeting and often it's only reluctantly given.

It's not deep and it's not transforming in any way. And they don't realise how great the prospect of being rewarded by our Father in Heaven is. Note that Jesus is quite happy to present reward as a motivation here.

But also notice that the reward is about the pleasure of particular parties and the applause of particular parties. Are you looking for the applause of other men or are you looking for the applause of God? Now many people when they're thinking about reward from God they still think about that in terms of their relationship to other people. They want a reward from God because it will put them above their neighbour.

They want a reward from God because it will give them some status in the eyes of men. And that is a fairly perverse way of thinking about all of this. But the human mind is fairly perverse when it comes to righteousness and it tends to find ways to pervert even those things that are good.

But the point of the reward is whose pleasure do you have? Are you seeking the pleasure of God even in the situation where that pleasure may cost you the applause of men? It may make you seem without honour in the sight of man. Now think about the story of the Gospel. The story of the Gospel culminates in the event of ultimate dishonour.

A man hung naked on a cross to die, cast out of the society, vomited out. Someone hung between heaven and earth as if the earth itself would no longer provide any hospitality for him. He has to be taken up from it.

Now that is not honour before man. He is spat upon. He is cursed.

He is stripped. And he is mocked and ridiculed. And in all of these different ways he is devoid of human honour and human applause.

But yet this is the event of the greatest honour. God has given him the name that is above every name that the name of Jesus every knee should bow. Now that presents the contrast in the darkest of terms.

The contrast between seeking the applause of man and having no applause or favour or praise from God. And seeking the praise of God to the point that we are prepared to be completely dishonoured by our fellow man. And that is the vision of the Gospels.

And so often I think within our faith we are driven by a vision of respectability. We want to be seen to be good upright citizens, nice people, people who are pillars of the society, who are approved of. And that is so central to our religious faith.

It's seen as what it's all about. To be a good upstanding moral person. Now this is even

in the case of many evangelicals and committed Christian believers where we claim a very deep faith and conviction that Christ is above all and even if we should suffer for his sake that this is something that we'll do because he is the one that we honour above all.

But even in those cases, so often we lie to ourselves about our motivations. We want to be seen by other people and recognised and approved. And the ability to actually stand out and say things that are unpopular.

Unpopular to the people who are closest to us. That is something that often we just can't do. We can't do because we are so taken up with the praise of man.

We're so addicted to it. We so need it. And it's understandable.

We feel very lonely. We feel ostracised. And there's something if we are disapproved of by others or cast out, we feel isolated.

And that hits us very, very deeply in a psychological way. And so it's understandable that we should want the praise of man. It's one of the deepest things that we have as a sort of natural hunger.

But yet Christ calls us to avoid this. To resist it. And to be those who develop an appetite for the praise of God.

And how do you do that? You do that by actually investing in it. By engaging in practices that are not seen by man. And the more that you engage in practices that aren't seen by your fellow man, the more that you'll become focused upon the person in whose eyes you are doing those practices.

The more you'll become focused upon the praise of God. And then when you are faced with a situation where you have to do something that costs you the praise of man, or that will lead to ridicule or dishonour, you will not find it so hard at that point. Because you are not left altogether without honour.

Rather, you know that you have honour in the sight of God. And that's what you care about. Because that's where you've been investing everything.

Jesus is also speaking all of this into a society where honour is a very big thing. How you are perceived by others is an honour culture. And so these statements come with a great challenge.

If his disciples lose face to their neighbours and their relatives and their immediate family, this is something that really costs them deeply in that society. It costs us deeply. But it's something that can be incredibly costly in such a society as theirs.

Now Jesus is calling them to do that. But to do that in a way that is based upon the pursuit of the honour of another. The pursuit of the honour of God.

And as you pursue that honour, the point is that you'll be rewarded by God's pleasure. That's what really matters. That God smiles upon what you're doing.

Not other men. Now the transformative practice that Jesus advocates is almsgiving that is in secret. So secret that your left hand doesn't know what your right hand is doing.

It's unaware of the actions of its counterpart. And Jesus' use of body members here is similar to his teaching on lust. In both cases Jesus is dealing with something very intimate.

And how we are to deal with these intimate obstacles. And the way in which we can often be obstacles to ourselves. Note the importance of these images draw our attention back to ourselves.

That we are often the obstacles to ourselves. We have these false motivations. Why don't you want your left hand to know what your right hand is doing? Because your left hand wants everyone else to know.

Maybe. Or in the case of your right hand causing you to sin. You recognise that those things that are very closest to you can be your deepest obstacles.

And so avoiding those obstacles can be a matter of dealing with things that are very close to us. Recognising those things that we hold very dear. And those things we really do not want to let go.

That those are the real problem and we need to address them. The you here is singular. And it's in contrast to the plurality of the hypocrites.

The religiosity of the hypocrites is something that occurs in the realm of the social spectacle. Whereas the religiosity or the religious practice rather of those who are the disciples of Christ should be primarily in the presence of God alone. Now that does not deny the place for corporate religious practice.

We do have occasions when we gather together, when we pray together or we worship together. But the point is in whose eyes are we doing this? Are we worshipping to be seen by our neighbour or are we worshipping in the eyes of God alone? Religious practice so easily gets conscripted into activities of social display. It becomes a matter of being seen by the people who are around us.

Being seen to be righteous. Being seen to be the right sort of person. Being seen to be upstanding and virtuous.

And we can broadcast these things in various subtle ways. Mark out who we are associated with and from whom we are going to be distanced. And you'll see this often even in the way that we'll give statements about things.

We'll avoid saying, calling out sin when it's something that is closer to us. We love to point out the sins of people in other camps or the sort of sins that belong to other classes. Whereas the people around us, we're wary of calling out their sins or the sins that are common within their quarters.

And the sins that are closest to us. We try and avoid those things because we know that that's not going to win us social capital. It's not going to win us friends and influence people.

Rather we want to be very careful to be seen to be upright. And so we want an image of uprightness. We want the perception, the representation of uprightness rather than the actual reality.

And the actual reality can dearly cost you. You can think about the lives of the prophets which Jesus complains his disciples to. The lives of the prophets were not characterised by lives of ease calling out angrily the sins of people of other camps.

There were lives that were bitter and difficult and lives characterised by persecution and ostracisation. Because they were calling out those sins that were the popular sins. The sins that belonged to the classes with power and influence.

The sins that when you call these sins out you don't actually get invited to the nice meals. These are not the sins that opposing them makes you popular. No.

These are the sorts of things that will get you ostracised when you observe these realities. And so Jesus is pointing his disciples to the danger of a religion shaped by social display. And that's such a big issue for us in the world today where being seen to hold the right political and social views is so much a part of our lives.

Particularly on social media. When social media is a matter of representation. We're trying to present an image of ourselves constantly.

All we have on social media is an image of ourselves. It's words. It's images.

It's representations. It's what we want to be seen. Our acceptable face that we present to the world.

And behind that there may be no action whatsoever. There may be actual very negative actions that contradict the image that we're portraying. But the important thing is we want an act to be seen by men.

And that danger is one that has never been so keen perhaps than in the modern day. We being seen to hold the right position can matter a lot more to us than actually holding the truth. And so that danger of social approval is immense for us.

The influence, the influences that we're exposed to, the pressures that we're exposed to

by our neighbours and our peers to hold positions that are socially attractive and appealing. That will win us applause. That will win us respect and honour.

And actually speaking out on issues that will make us unpopular. That really is not something we'll do. And note again the importance of Jesus connecting the virtues and vices of certain forms of religious practice and contexts and forms of practice.

Now this is important for us because Jesus is recognising that there are virtues and vices. The virtue of seeking the praise of God and the vice of seeking the praise of man. Now those two things correspond with actual forms and practices.

The practice of seeking the praise of God is cultivated best in contexts of secrecy. Where we're actually avoiding public spectacle. Where we're trying to go away from public spectacle as much as possible.

There's a modesty to it. It does not want to be seen. It's not broadcasting or projecting itself.

It's hiding itself. It's more concerned with the praise of God than the praise of man. On the other hand, the other is connected with a broadcasting of itself.

Now one of the things that you need to notice here is that Jesus advocates not just not broadcasting yourself. But actually going out of your way to do the opposite of broadcasting yourself. To step away from contexts where you would be seen and to go into contexts of privacy and solitude and secrecy.

Now thinking about that within our current context. We have contexts that have been created by our media, social media in particular. That present us with correlates for vices and virtue.

In particular, there is a context on social media where we're constantly on social display. We're constantly presenting a brand of ourselves. Every word that we say is part of an act of self-branding.

It's saying to the world, this is the person that I am. Not just these are beliefs that I hold. It's something that is part of our self-representation.

Now in a world where we're purely anonymous and acting online, we would not be doing that. But in our context where our identities are entirely formed around what we're saying and what image we're projecting of ourselves. In that sort of context, it matters greatly what you're saying because what you're saying reflects back upon you.

And in that context of social display, it is very, very hard to avoid the vice of doing your religious deeds to be seen by men. And so Jesus would call us, I think, to actively step away from those contexts for our religious practice. To as much as possible step back

and act in contexts of secrecy.

Now that doesn't mean we can't be active in those contexts. It just means that we should be aware of their danger, their deep danger to spiritual life. Because they encourage through their accentuation of social display, they encourage vice.

Now this is something that's not just exclusive to social media. It's also something that we can see in the context of public life. Now there's a very interesting treatment of this in the recent book by Halbert, Howell and Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics*.

Talking about the character of politics in 1st Samuel. 1st and 2nd Samuel. One of the things that it observes is the way that there's this constant tension in the character of David between the positive image that he's presenting of himself in his actions.

An image that is of great political capital and usefulness. The more that he's presented as a righteous, gracious, sort of generous and merciful king and figure, the more actually helps his dynasty. It helps him to gain power.

On the other hand, it makes it very difficult to understand his true motivations. Because in this realm of social display, in this realm where all his righteous deeds are used, can be presented in a way that win him favour with man, how do we know if they are genuine or just an act? And how do we know that his heart is actually right with God? And the more that you see these expedient things that happen to David, these alibis that he has where he's just not involved in a particular action that actually is very favourable to him, the more you start to question how much of this is image management and how much of this is actual true righteousness. And that is a problem that they observe with politics more generally.

The ends and means can be confused. It's very difficult to say what is true motivation, what's truly being motivated by virtue, and what is motivated an image of virtue presented to man to be appealing and to actually serve to gain us power and applause. And that challenge is one that's integral to the task of politics where you're doing these things in the public eye.

And the more that we're starting to live in this public spectacle, the more that we're facing the same sort of problem. And so Jesus would teach us, go away to the private place and pursue your faith there. Pursue your religious practice in a context where these mixed motives and this danger of constantly being led astray to pursue the applause of man will not be so keen.

We should note also that Jesus practices this himself. He's known for secret prayer. Now, not in a public way.

His disciples know that he will often go away from them for a while and spend time in prayer. It's not something he's broadcasting to everyone. But the designed audience of

our prayer should be God alone.

Jesus is not, again, denying that there is a place for corporate prayer. But the focus is on orientation. When we gather together to pray, the important thing is that we're praying towards God, not towards the audience of our neighbours.

And so when we're praying together in church, we should be praying in such a way that the attention is not drawn to us, but to God. In the next teaching that Jesus gives concerning prayer, the contrast is not so much between his disciples and the hypocrites as between them and the Gentiles. So the point is that the Gentiles, it's not necessarily that they are pagans, but that they are religious outsiders.

And their prayers are mostly characterised by meaningless babbling and much speaking. And often this is a sort of practice that can creep into our own prayers. It becomes a sort of when our tongues run ahead of our minds and often in our emphasis upon informal and extemporaneous prayer, we can have that problem that we're just thinking that the more we pray, if we just churn out more and more words, that that is what matters.

Now, this is not a denial of the importance of persistent prayer. It's not a denial of the value of actually praying informally, using our own words. But the danger is that we can treat prayers as a sort of verbal gesticulation that we're trying to wave our tongues about to get God's attention.

Or we can think about prayer as magical and maybe somewhat mechanical. You can think about Tibetan prayer wheels where you just turn this thing and it prays automatically for you. It's an automation of the prayer process.

As you move around this wheel with the mantra upon it, it kind of does your prayer for you. In the same way, people can treat prayer as a sort of mechanical thing that we're trying to get God's attention through repeating words or mantras or expressions or just multiplying word upon word upon word. Rather than setting our hearts towards God, communicating our hearts truthfully towards God.

And we're not intended to do that. Rather, our words should be few and to the point. We're not trying to verbally gesticulate at God.

His eyes are already upon us. He knows what we need. And prayer in that situation must be a turning of our hearts to God.

It's an ordering of our hearts towards their creator and their father. Now, we know that Jesus goes on to talk about he gives a prayer. And within that prayer, you'll see that it's not a lengthy prayer.

It's a prayer that's fairly short to the point. And yet it's a very powerful prayer. We know from very early on this prayer was used on a consistent basis.

The Didache talks about it being prayed three times a day. And the poetic form of the prayer would also suggest that it's designed for memorization and a sort of non-mechanical, mentally and spiritually engaged repetition. That we're supposed to pray this prayer again and again in our lives.

It's not just something that we pray once and leave the words behind. The form of the prayer also suggests not just a model prayer. That this is the sort of prayer you should be praying.

These are the sort of elements you should include. Now, it is that. But it is also a specific prayer that is given to us that we should pray as an alternative to the prayer practices of the Gentiles.

This is what true prayer looks like. Now, within this prayer, we can see once again triadic structures. Now, I've already noted the way that there is this structure within the Sermon on the Mount as a whole.

And the Sermon on the Mount at its very heart has the Lord's Prayer. Which I think helps us to see something of the importance of this. So you have the introductory blessings and then the warnings at the end.

You have teaching about the fulfillment of the law and the prophets at both ends. You have two double triads. One at each end.

And then you have the central triad. And in the centre of the triad, there's this teaching concerning the Lord's Prayer. And in the very centre of that are the first three petitions.

Putting all of that together, I think it gives us a sense of what is at the very heart of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. It's, Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. That's the very centre of the Sermon on the Mount.

In a literary form. But also, theologically, that's what it's all boiling down to. At the very heart is this structure.

And out from that, we see radiating this larger structure that shows what it looks like in practice. Now, within the prayer, there is a triadic structure. It begins with the address, Our Father in Heaven.

But then it has three You petitions, followed by three We or Us petitions. So, the name, the kingdom and the will of God come before and above all else. Those are the three petitions with which we begin.

Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Three You's and then the next three petitions concern Us or We. Give us this

day our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors. And then finally, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. And so, at the very heart of the Sermon on the Mount is this triadic structure.

And the triadic structure reveals, once again, this order of putting God first and other things flowing from that. As Jesus will later say, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you. The important thing is that we set God's name, God's kingdom and God's will first.

And after that, the other things follow. It begins with an address, Our Father in Heaven. And perhaps more than anything else, what comes into focus in this chapter is the fatherhood of God.

In the first 18 verses of this chapter, there are 10 references to the fatherhood of God. And this really is something that is distinctive within the New Testament. It's not something that we find a lot within the Old Testament.

There are various references to God as father, but they are fairly few and far between. And yet in this chapter, bang, bang, bang, one after another, it's as if this doctrine that has been more beneath the surface, sometimes reaching the surface at great climactic moments in history, is now breaking the surface completely and we see it clearly for what it is. There are a few things to note about this.

That it comes into so much clearer focus within the New Testament and particularly through Christ's own relationship with his father. That our relationship to God as father is in part a participation in God's own relationship, in the son's own relationship with the father. There's also a danger of over-intimatizing the language of father, treating the word Abba as daddy.

This is something that follows the work, I think it was Eurimius who wrote upon the translation of Abba as daddy or papa, this intimate form of address to a father figure. And that's been disputed by James Barr and others. And I think James Barr and others have the best of that debate and that's generally been acknowledged within the guild.

Now, another thing to notice is that God is not spoken of as our father, not my daddy. We don't have the same singularity of relationship with the father, the son does. And also our relationship with the father is a participation in the son, son's relationship, that we share with the rest of his people.

We should appreciate the love and the concern that God shows for his children, but we should beware of over-intimatizing it in a way that breaks the distance that should exist. The distance that should exist that recognizes that God is deeply concerned for us and loving towards us. But he is the creator and we are the creature.

He is God and we are not. And often our form of address to God can be over-intimatizing. And it also fails to recognize the degree to which this is something that we share with others.

This is a common filial relationship that we are all, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we all share a relationship of sonship to God. We all relate to God as father. And that relationship with God as father is not something that's exclusive and privatized to us in a way that we'd often express it within certain forms of prayer.

The fourth thing to notice is that whereas father language does occasionally foreground the relationship between a young child and their father, for instance, we see later on in chapter 7, the child asking his father for bread and the father giving what is good for his children. In the same way, we can often think of our relationship with God in terms of the intimacy between the very young child, the toddler perhaps, and the father. Whereas often what we see in scripture, in the gospels particularly, is that the image of sonship is focused not upon the infant or young toddler, but focused upon the young adult male.

And so the son is the young man who's working with and for his father, who's working in the name of his father or alongside his brothers. He's someone who's going to inherit the land and the title and the significance of his father. He's having a wedding feast thrown for him.

All of these images are images that challenge some of our over-intimatizing and our juvenileizing and infantilizing of the images of sonship. And one of the effects of that is to lose our sense of what it means to be the sons. To be the sons of God in Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, is partly a recognition of our utter dependence, in which case the images of childhood are appropriate.

But it's also an image of that we might be sons of our father in heaven as we are those who seek peace. We are peacemakers. Now that's not something that infants do primarily.

These are actions as we love our neighbors. These are, and as we pray for those who are enemies and do good to them, these are things that are more characteristic of adults. They're characterized by agency and action.

And so if we're to be true sons and daughters, we should be characterized not just by a passive dependence upon God, but by an active living out of his will. We're acting in his name in the world. That's what it means to be sons and daughters.

Not just that we're passively receiving what we need from his hand. That is true. But we are also those who are acting in his name as his representatives, as his sons and daughters.

And this is part of what the Sermon on the Mount should stress for us, should highlight

for us. Another thing to notice is that the gender is not unimportant. There is a distinction between God and his creation.

A distinction that would not be expressed in quite the same way were God spoken of as mother. If we spoke about God as mother, we might think of God bearing the creation in her womb. And that relationship, and it's interesting, when people start to talk about God as mother, how things shift, how the images of God, as they shift, our relationship with God changes quite significantly.

And within scripture there is an emphasis upon male images and languages, language for God. That God is father, God is judge, God is lawgiver, he's sovereign, he's king, he's lord. All of those things have a sort of masculine twist to them.

That's not to say that God is a male. God is not a male in the biological sense. Nor is God a man, as we might think about as a human being, a human being who's a male.

That's not a way to think about God. God came as a man, but we should not project God as some sort of great bearded man in the sky. That's sort of idolatry.

Rather we should notice that God is giving us this language as a true manifestation of something of who he is. There is analogical language here, and we should be aware of limiting God within this, or projecting the image up in a way that plays an idolatrous purpose. But we should recognise that God chooses this language rather than other language, and that that choice of language is significant.

The more that we speak about God using the language that he has given us, using the images that he has given us, the more faithfully we will relate to and understand him. Finally, father language is a calling upon God to recognise us and to act on our behalf. So think about the first occurrence of father language within the Old Testament, or at least by implication.

Israel is my firstborn son. That statement in the context of the Exodus. God recognises Israel as his firstborn son, and Israel is going to be delivered from the womb of Egypt.

That's something that occurs in the Red Sea. They're swaddled through the wilderness, and then they're brought into the Promised Land. Now, God speaking of himself as father, or people appealing to God as father, is a calling among other things for that recognition to take place.

It's a call that God would recognise us as his people, and therefore act on our behalf. If you look in Isaiah chapter 63 and 64, we see a lot of this. Now notice what's being connected there.

That God's name as father is a name that implies a relationship with and a recognition of us. For someone to say to someone else, father, it is something that calls for an act of

mutual recognition. It involves an act of recognition on one hand that is calling for a reciprocal act of recognition.

I am calling to you as father, recognising that you have authority in relationship to me, but also you have a commitment to me, a loving commitment. And when we appeal to God as father, we are coming with that sort of commitment. We're calling for God to act in our situation.

We're reminding him that we are his people. And note that it goes on to talk about the fact that we become like those over whom you never ruled, like those who are not called by your name. Now when we're calling God our father, and then immediately saying, hallowed be your name, one of the things that is implied in there is a call for God to vindicate his identity as our father.

To demonstrate in history that he is our father by acting in a way that brings salvation. Now that's a very bold petition to come with. It's one of the reasons why we begin in many liturgies, the Lord's Prayer, with that invitation that ends with we are bold to pray.

There is a certain boldness that is given to us by the fact that Jesus has given us these words. These words are given by the Son so that we might speak to God and appeal to God as our father. And that recognition of sonship is one that we have by virtue of the Son and the adoption that we have in him.

The first petition expresses the desire that God's name be hallowed. And God's concern for the holiness of his name is seen in various places throughout the Old Testament. So for instance, that statement that God's people being named by his name, the point is they bear his name, God should act on their behalf to hallow his name.

To show that his name is not a common name. We see this in Ezekiel chapter 36. Therefore say to the house of Israel, thus says the Lord God, it is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. Now think about what's being said there.

God acts on behalf of his name. When we talk about God's name being hallowed, we are appealing for God to act among other things. We're named by his name.

He's our Father. And we're calling for him to act to vindicate his name. It's not just a statement of fact.

It is that. It is a statement and a desire that God's name would be recognised for what it

is. And a statement that it is indeed a holy name.

But it's also a call for God to act to display the holiness of his name through action in the world. God is ultimately the one who will hallow his own name. The second petition, Your Kingdom Come, is a calling for God's eschatological kingdom or reign to come.

For God's rule to be seen in the situations of our history. Now we use the language of God's kingdom, and it can have different senses. It can be referred to God's rule, and it can refer to God's reign, or it can refer to the territory of God's reign, or the state of God's reign.

But here what we're calling for is for God's rule to come in our situation and in the situations of history. And this is in part an appeal for the eschatological kingdom. Your kingdom come in its full consummation, but also your kingdom come in that already not yet way that we experience here and now.

That God acts in our particular situations, giving us some glimmer or glimpse of what the kingdom will involve in its full and complete flowering. The third petition, Your Will Be Done on Earth as it is in Heaven, is a calling for, I think, redemptive righteousness. Your will be done is not just people obey your law in a very static way that they're just not disobeying anything.

But your will be done, your redemptive practice be wrought within the world. There is here, I think, a hungering and thirsting for God's righteousness. It's an expressing of a desire that God would act, that God's will would not just remain up in Heaven, with the world being a place of darkness and gloominess, where God's will is not really being wrought, but that God's will would trespass that boundary between Heaven and Earth, break through the firmament, that the heavens will be opened and that God would act in our situation with power.

Now, that expression is one, I think, also that recognizes there is a sort of typological relationship between Heaven and Earth. Heaven is the model, is the pattern that should be enacted upon Earth. And as we look through scripture, we see this playing out.

So there is a heavenly reality that is modeled on Earth in the temple, in the sanctuary, in Eden or something else like that. And then that pattern needs to flow out to the whole world. When we're saying, your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven, we're saying, may that pattern that exists in Heaven, in God's very presence, may that pattern come down and spread throughout the entirety of our lives and society.

May the glory of God cover the Earth as the waters cover the sea. And observe the way that all of these petitions are putting us in the posture of longing for God's action in history, for hungering and thirsting after his righteousness. And in all of these ways, it's conforming us to God's will, teaching us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.

And the fourth petition is now this turn from the you petitions to the us or the we petitions. Give us this day our daily bread. And here, I think there might be an allusion to manna, the daily character of the bread.

And there is debate over the particular meaning of the word that is referred to as the daily bread. But it might be a reference to manna. So each day God provides what is sufficient for the day that they need.

And as we look through the story of the wilderness, that's part of God's preparation of them, in part to be generous people, to be dependent upon God's provision, and to be people that have what they need and are content in that. Now later on when they enter the land, God has a sort of recurring of that pattern with the ephah that's connected with the first fruits. As they offer that, they are reminded of the manna.

That was the measure of the manna they had each day. And so that offering is a recognition that that pattern of daily provision is one that pervades the entirety of their life, even as a settled agricultural society. That they should look at their lives as one of daily provision.

That God is giving us everything that we need, even if that is the case of a matter of our own providence and prudence, setting up for ourselves the resources that we need. Ultimately, everything that we need day by day comes from the hand of God. Whether that's the energy that we need to prepare for tomorrow, or whether it's the breath, the next breath that we're going to take.

All of this comes from God. And that emphasis upon daily bread, in some sense, it presents the most radical vision of how we relate to God. We relate to God as beggars, as those who have not accumulated wealth and resources, but as those who every single day must come and seek our good from God's hand.

And that, even in a settled society with great wealth, is something that we must take up as a posture as disciples of Christ. God is the one from whom we find our daily subsistence and sustenance and our immediate provision. Receiving all the good things of the world as a constant, continual gift gives us a recognition of a hand beyond our own human providence as well.

It helps us to recognise what this is all ultimately about. The fifth petition concerns the forgiving of debts. And at the very heart of the New Covenant is a general release from Israel's debt.

Christ comes to declare the year of the Lord's favour, that all these debts are forgiven and people are set free. This is the year of Jubilee. And we've spoken already about Isaiah chapter 61 as a background.

All of these things are involved in a reciprocal element. If we've been set free, we must

set other people free. Go back to the story of Israel being delivered from Egypt.

As they are delivered from Egypt, they are set free from slavery. And then they are given laws concerning slavery, laws concerning giving rest to their slaves, laws concerning setting their slaves free in the year of Jubilee and other events like that, laws concerning how you should not mistreat a slave. All of this is recognising that what God has done to us and for us, we should do for others.

Now slavery is a particularly pronounced form of indebtedness. It's an indebtedness that is so grievous that you have to give your self, your very self, into the service of another. And what Jesus is talking about here is if God has set us free, we need to live out that freedom towards others by setting them free.

And if we are not acting in that way, then we've not truly been set free. We're living in a way that's just importing Egypt to the Promised Land. That way of living that held us in bondage, we're importing that way of living and applying it towards others.

So there is a reciprocal element here. We request forgiveness as we have forgiven others. As Jesus goes on to stress immediately after the prayer, if we do not forgive others, we ourselves will not be forgiven.

And there's an interesting piece that Matt over at Carpe Caecum, the blog, quoted from Simone Weil just a couple of days ago that reminded me of her treatment of the Sermon on the Mount. Within her book where she treats this, it's *Waiting on God* and other essays, she observes that this should involve a remission of all debts, even the debts of gratitude and compensation that we believe that people or God owe us. So we've done things for other people.

We've acted in a way towards them. And we think that not only do they deserve some sort of recompense for the wrong things they've done to us, but we've done good things for them. We've done them favors.

We've shown them all sorts of good deeds. And we can look to them to reward us. It's another form of looking to man for applause and praise.

We can look to man for a reward and place people in our debt. So we have in our mind this very careful ledger of all the debts that other people owe us, whether that's the things that we're bitter about, the things that they have not actually, the wrong things that they did to us that we haven't forgiven them for, or those things that we've done for them, the things that they owe us for. And we have this very carefully tabulated document in our minds.

And Jesus says, burn it, tear it up. It's no longer applicable. If you're going to live within the kingdom, you have to live as one who does not hold such accounts.

You have to be one who is prepared to relinquish all these debts, all these claims that you have upon other people. You relinquish those claims that you have upon other people and upon God and put yourself in the hands of God and neighbor. And all of this involves a surrendering of the demands of the ego because this is often a way in which we take control of our situation, take control of our status, take control of our social position by putting other people in our debt, by pursuing the praise of other people.

Jesus' teaching here is deeply radical, that we're to be those who relinquish those sorts of debts. We're those who depend upon God's giving and God's forgiving. And the entirety of our lives is driven by those two fundamental realities.

Out of those realities, we gain a different orientation of life. We can forgive others because we ourselves have been forgiven. Now, often we think about our righteousness as a competitive sort of thing, a matter of gaining status.

If someone does something wrong to us, they diminish in status and we can hold them in a sort of slavery to us. They can never fully atone for what they have done. And we use their guilt against them to manipulate them and gain power for ourselves.

And Jesus is saying, set them free and live as a free person. I have set you free. You must set other people free.

As people who depend upon God's giving and forgiving. And in English, we have those words being related in a way that helps us to see their more theoretical connection. That they are connected in a sort of logic, common logic, not just verbally, but they share something more deeply in common.

It's not the case in the Greek, but it is something that helps us to recognize the true source of our existence. We can give up our claims on others in part because God is the guarantor of all debts. It's one of the things that we see as we read through the New Testament.

And Peter Lighthouse deals with this very well in his book on gratitude. That there is a radical approach to debts and their occurrence and placing other people in our debt. Jesus' contemporaries were in a world not just of honor, but of gift.

And in a world of gift, gift is not always a positive thing. We tend to think of gift as a very positive reality. That if I give you something, it's just a generous act.

But even in our own society, we know that gifts generally come with some sort of string attached. If I give you a gift, I expect something in return. At the very least, I expect some sort of appreciation.

But within the ancient world, gifts were a dangerous thing to accept. And so, talk about rulers in the ancient world being spoken of as benefactors. Now, why would they be

spoken of as benefactors? They're giving great gifts, but they give gifts like the mob boss gives you a gift.

If your business is failing and then the mob boss gives you a healthy sum of money, you don't want to accept that gift. You know the sort of strings that it has attached. And in the ancient world, that was the sort of culture of gift that they were living in.

A world where people lived in constant indebtedness. And this is a world where, within our society, we tend to try and dissolve debts immediately. So, if I've given money in exchange for a particular product, that transaction is immediately dissolved.

Within the ancient world, the dynamics of that transaction can continue with a more continued relationship. There's a sense of obligation involved. And within our sort of society, we try and dissolve those bonds of obligation.

We don't live in a gift society in the same way. We have a more transactional sort of relationship. Now, in many contexts, that's not a healthy thing.

But we should recognize, on the other side, the dangers of a debt society. And Jesus is speaking to that sort of society, which often we practice ourselves in our intimate relationships, in our social dynamics with other people. We try and put other people in our debt.

But, within the New Testament, God is the one who guarantees all debts. So, rather than saying that we give to the poor to place the poor in our debt, that they feel obligated towards us because we've shown them charity. Rather, God is the one who will reward those who show charity towards the poor.

This is not a means by which we can gain power through charity. And often people don't want to accept charity because they know that there are strings attached, whether a drop in your honor, or whether it's a matter of accepting someone's manipulation of you, or someone's use of guilt to control you. And Jesus teaches against all of that.

And the New Testament practice undermines all of that. Paul can say, my God will supply all of your needs in response, according to his riches in Christ Jesus, in his response to the great gift of the Philippians to him. He doesn't feel indebted to them.

Rather, he expresses God's goodness, that God can guarantee everything. And in the same way, he expresses the patterns of gift in a way that recognizes that we are giving what we have been given. Think about Paul's whole theology of gift, the gifts of the Spirit.

There is one gift of the Spirit which God has given to the church. And that gift of the Spirit is represented in numerous spiritual gifts, plural. And what does that mean? God has given to the church, but he has given to the church to share in his giving process.

So God has given the Spirit to the church so that the different members of the church might share in his process of giving, in his generosity. And so we don't ultimately own these things ourselves. And this whole cycle of forgiving and being characterized by thanksgiving, and by being a people who are forgiving, thanksgiving and giving, that is something that ultimately depends upon a completely transformed posture to life.

And is throughout the whole New Testament. The final petition is a prayer for deliverance from the time of testing and the evil one. And we should maybe think back to some have protested against this, even Pope Francis has said that God actually doesn't tempt people, so this should be translated differently.

It's to miss the point of what's being said. And this is well discussed by Wesley Hill in his recent book on the Lord's Prayer, where he observes that just a few chapters earlier, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into temptation. Part of the point of this is the temptation is the time of testing, is the time where you are tested by God and brought maybe to the extreme point where you might fail.

And we are praying in part that God would not lead us to that point. In chapter 26 verse 41, we have Jesus' instruction to his disciples, Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

What's the point? Jesus is coming to that point of testing. He's having to wrestle as he's coming towards the time of the cross. He knows the pain that it will involve.

He knows the difficulty, the alienation, all these other things. And yet he's going to be faithful in that time of testing. The disciples are going to be sifted, or Satan wants to sift Peter and the other disciples like wheat.

And Christ calls for them not to enter into that, to pray that they not enter into that sort of testing, a testing that they are unprepared for. And when we think about what Christ provides, he saves us from the utmost testing that we would otherwise be brought into. He bears the full brunt of that testing so that his people might be relieved.

That doesn't mean that we don't have a face testing, that we aren't ever brought into positions where our faith is stretched, maybe nearly to breaking point. But God is one who calls us to pray for deliverance from temptation and from those position of testing. That God would not lead us into a position where our faith is not sufficient.

And so as we call for God to act in this way, we're recognising our own limits. We're recognising that God is the one who forges our path for us. That Satan, what power he has over us is only a power that's given to him.

Think about the story of Job, that God removes a hedge of protection from Job to allow the evil one to test him. Now that testing is good in many ways for Job. He grows through it.

But it's one that stretches him nearly to breaking point. And we need to pray that God continue to protect us, that we not be torn apart by the evil one. And so our prayer for deliverance from evil and that we not be led into temptation is against that sort of backdrop.

Some manuscripts also include a doxology, the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever, amen. But that is not found in many of the better manuscripts. It comes from, presumably they would have been praying this within synagogues and early Christian churches from very early stage.

And the doxology would have been added. We find a similar doxology in First Chronicles chapter 29 verse 11. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours.

Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. That sort of doxology is something that we find there and I think also was naturally added to the prayer later on within this worship of the church. What Jesus teaches next concerns fasting once again, doing our righteousness in secret, not broadcasting the fact, which is very easy to broadcast, that we are undertaking a fast.

You can think about the ways in which it's very easy to present the difficulties and the other things that we're bearing for the sake of our faith. In a way, it just attracts other people's attention and pity and admiration that other people see us and they say, that is a righteous person. See all the things that they are doing for their faith.

See the way that they're fasting these times of week, etc. And we're supposed to be quite the opposite. We're supposed to hide that as much as possible.

And Jesus' teaching in this passage that follows is very much like the sort of teaching we might find in someone like Solomon, as Peter Lighthouse observes. Jesus is approaching the law with wisdom. He's recognizing shrewd ways that we can conform ourselves to it.

Once again, Jesus is recognizing that motives don't float free, but they can be nudged and pulled by material situations and conditions. And so the problem when he's dealing with material wealth is that part of the problem is the loss of material wealth. Solomon talks about this in Ecclesiastes that even if you invest all your life in this really wisely and accumulate great wealth, you don't know.

You might leave it to a son who's foolish and might waste it all. You might find that your life is taken from you and you have no time to enjoy your wealth. And so this is fleeting.

This is not something that's ultimately going to provide you with security. And so it's very similar to Solomon's teaching in Ecclesiastes concerning material wealth. The alternative is to invest your resources in spiritual things.

Now, note the shrewdness of Jesus' teaching. Jesus, once again, focuses upon concrete action. The alternative is not just set your heart on spiritual things.

It's very easy to say. It's very difficult to do. Jesus focuses upon investing your resources in spiritual things.

That's very wise teaching because your heart will tend to follow your resources. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. So if you want to set treasure in heaven, what do you do? You invest your resources in causes of heaven.

You invest your time. You invest your money. You invest all your different resources and your property in those things that are actually driven towards the kingdom of God.

And you'll find before long you start caring about the kingdom of God a lot more than you did previously. The more that you invest your treasure, however, in earthly things, the more you'll find that your heart is torn. Your heart is torn between the cause of the kingdom and those earthly things.

So Jesus' teaching is very shrewd here. Pay attention to where your heart is. And if you want to change the direction of your heart, put your resources into different endeavours.

Put your resources into things that are oriented towards the kingdom. Put your resources into the service of God rather into the accumulation of wealth. So as you do that, you will find that there is another benefit.

Your heart will follow your resources and your heart will be invested in the kingdom of God. But you'll also find it's not vulnerable to loss in the same way. It's secure.

It's not vulnerable to moth and rust. And it's not vulnerable to thieves. It's not vulnerable to the folly of those who come after us.

Rather, it's a recognition that life under the sun is characterised by the vapour that Solomon talked about in Ecclesiastes. The vapour is something that can't be held onto. It's unpredictable.

It can pass away unexpectedly. It's something that masks reality from us. And it's something that's inscrutable and can't be controlled.

It's something that really doesn't offer any gain or something that lasts. And so the danger that we have is spending all of our lives trying to shepherd the wind, trying to order the vapour, trying to create gain in a situation where it's as if we're building sandcastles on the seashore and the tide's going to come in and there's going to be no sign of all our effort. Jesus is saying invest the things, your resources in the cause of God.

Because he knows that we're invested in our property. We're invested in our money.

We're invested in our efforts and all these sorts of things.

So put the things that you're invested in in something that your heart should be invested in. And as you put them in that service, you'll find that your heart will follow. It's a very wise teaching.

Jesus has already used the imagery of the lamp to describe his disciples. And we talked about the lamp giving light to the whole room. Now he used it to describe the eye.

The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.

If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness? We can talk about expressions like the apple of our eye. The apple of our eye is related to the pupil. It's that thing at the very heart of our eye.

And we use that expression, the apple of our eye, to think about those things that we are most focused upon. That we most love and cherish above all else. The eye orients the body.

So you turn someone's head by catching their eye. And the eye, as it orients the head, it moves everything else with the head. If your eye has light as its focus, if what you're focused upon is the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then your entire body will be affected by that.

Your entire body will follow that direction. In Matthew, I think there's something more going on with the bad eye, which is connected to generosity. In Matthew 20, verse 15, it talks about, Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? Or more literally, is your eye bad because I am good? And so the eye associated with begrudging generosity, with envy, with perhaps a certain sort of jealousy and refusal to share and give.

And I think that's fitting in with this larger imagery. In the context, it's referring to people who have a dysfunctional relationship with wealth, a dysfunctional relationship with money. They cannot give.

They cannot be generous. They're grasping and they are controlled by that. It's something that gives light.

If they are generous and giving and good, if they are someone who's set upon the kingdom of God, then the eye will be good. And every part of their body, their actions will be affected by that. However, if their eye is dark, if they're characterized by grasping, if they're not generous, if they're all these other things, every part of their body will be afflicted.

Jesus goes on to talk about mastery. 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.

Or literally, mammon. And I think speaking about mammon as a sort of personified thing is important. Mammon is something that can become like a god.

It takes on a life of its own. Our powers can place us under their power. So we can often think that money is my power and my resources.

But you find after time, you're living your life around this. You think it's your power, but it's what's governing your life. It's what's your focus and your fixation.

And as Paul can talk about it, maybe paraphrasing in 1 Corinthians 6, your liberties can take liberties with you. And so if you're thinking all the time about money as your power and resource, not recognising the way that money can be a power that takes power over you, you're losing sight of the reality. I think this is more generally an issue within our society, where we often think about the power that things give to us, and don't think about the way that they exert power over us.

Think of this about technologies, for instance. Our technologies can render us subject to them. We think, for instance, about the development of the car.

The car enables us to move swiftly from place A to place B. But the car has become something that's ordered the entirety of our life and society around us. It means that we live at great distances from one another, that neighbourhoods are broken up, that children can't play in the streets, that we worship in places where we're no longer worshipping with our neighbours. And a great many other things that we didn't necessarily sign up for.

But the more that we gave ourselves to the pursuit of the power that that offered, the more that we found that that power held us in its thrall and everything else started to be ordered around it. And we think, for instance, that the economy makes us rich, but we can enslave ourselves to the cause of its continual growth. We think that what makes us wealthy is our bank accounts.

And we put so much effort into making them bigger and don't recognise how much we're enslaved to just figures on a balance sheet. And Jesus is pointing out here the way that money, mammon, possessions, can be a master. It becomes this sort of index of absolute value.

And it becomes something that's a fixation and a focus for us that prevents us from seeing that we are subject to it. We think it's ours. We think it's in our possession.

But really we have become its possession. The danger of focusing upon ideas and

motivations then is important here. We often think about ideas and motivations being the most important thing.

The ideas change the world. But Jesus talks so much about concrete practices, about putting your money where you want your heart to be, about recognising the way that money can become your master. What he observes in this, and also cutting off your hand and other things like the practices that he advocates for reconciliation, etc., concrete practices, concrete forms, material realities going to the secret place as opposed to the public square.

There are contexts that are conducive for things that are righteous and contexts that are conducive for vice. There are ways in which it's not just about ideas and motivations. It's about cultivating these things through the careful recognition of how particular contexts are conducive for growth of virtue and growth of vice.

For recognising those things that are obstacles to righteous practice and those things that assist it. To recognising those things that allow vice to grow within us and those things that arrest its progress. And throughout Jesus is giving us very concrete advice.

Like Solomon, Jesus draws attention then in this passage that immediately follows as the alternative to this focus upon money and wealth, having our hearts caught up in things that are going to perish and fail, and being people who are driven by the eye that is bad, and people who are in slavery to mammon. Jesus gives us an alternative teaching, once again, that has lots of resonance with the sort of teaching we might find in Ecclesiastes and elsewhere. Jesus draws attention to the creatures, to God's concern and provision for them.

Once again, the issue is our attitude to material possessions and provisions. We are to adopt a posture of dependency upon God for our daily needs. Remember, we should think back to give us this day our daily bread.

It's a recognition that even if we've provided all these different ways for ensuring that we will have bread for weeks to come, ultimately all comes down to God's daily provision. And worry is more likely to diminish our life than to extend it. There's a certain point at which worry is not just prudent provision for the future, but it's a lack of faith and a preoccupation with trying to transcend the limits that God has placed upon us.

So this is not a denial of the value of prudence and provision for ourselves, but it's a spiritual posture to be adopted with anxiety being the alternative. It's a contrast between worry on the one hand and faith on the other. Now, if you do this, God has given you resources.

God has given you the ability to use your hands. God has given you energy. God has given you health.

God has given you money. God has given you a society where resources are available to you. And he's provided all of those things.

Now, you use those things wisely. You're someone who works diligently. You're someone who provides for the future, etc.

But there comes a point where you are trying to secure everything, to make sure that everything against any particular eventuality is secure. And the more that you become preoccupied with that, the more you'll find you cannot secure things absolutely. Ultimately, you'll always be drawn back to the fact that we rest in God's hands.

We depend upon his provision and his protection. There's no way that we can be absolutely secure. And the more that we are driven by worry beyond those things that God has provided for us, the more we'll become people that are losing sight of faith.

Now, what is this faith about? This faith is a posture towards God that recognises that he is concerned with and that he sees us, that he is a good and loving father. Again, we should consider the context of mission, that these are people who would be accompanying Christ on his mission, people who would have to take risks, they'd have to leave their family business, they'd have to leave, in some cases, their families. They'd have to go out and they would have to wander from place to place depending upon hospitality.

And that requires a lot of putting yourself in God's hand. And to do that requires a relinquishment of some of the control that we like to have over the future. And so just in the sense of forgiveness being a relinquishing of our claims upon other people and the ways that we like people to be in our debt, so this approach of not worrying is a putting of ourselves in God's hand as the giving father, as the God who is concerned for our good, as the God who is kind and who is attentive to his creatures.

If he sees the lilies of the field and dresses them so beautifully, how can he not provide clothing for us? If he is a God who sees the sparrow fall, how is he not so much more attentive to the needs and the concerns and the situations facing his own children? We should think also to the parables that Jesus gives. What are the thorns that choke the seed? It's the worry of the world and the deceit of wealth. What is worry? It's the preoccupation with things of this world.

And it's connected with the deceit of wealth. What's the deceit of wealth? Well, among other things, it's the way that wealth insinuates itself into our lives, captures our hearts, captures our eyes and makes us its servants. It's that threefold parallel or that threefold teaching, that triad that Jesus teaches concerning wealth.

That is the danger for us. And until we recognise that, the deceit of wealth and the way that that's connected with the worry of the world, we will not be truly free sons of the

kingdom. Rather, we need to be people who pursue faith.

And as people of faith are pursuing God's kingdom above all else and are able to put ourselves in his hand, to be people who give, thanks give and forgive. And as we do those things, we'll find that money does not have the same hold over us. What is our priority? It must be seeking the kingdom of God and God's righteousness.

Everything else is second. And that is ultimately where we will find security. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.

Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. If you have any questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and other podcasts and videos like it, please do so using my Patreon or my PayPal accounts.

God bless and thank you for listening.