

OpenTheo

Matthew 6:1 - 6:8: Charity, Prayer, and Fasting



Sermon on the Mount - Steve Gregg

In this message, Steve Gregg explores the symmetry of three subject matters, charity, prayer, and fasting, in Matthew chapter 6. He encourages listeners to pray with genuine motives and avoid using vain repetitions. Gregg also emphasizes the importance of acknowledging our dependency on God and the value of fasting as a token commitment to draw nearer to God. Lastly, he reminds us that prayer is not just a therapeutic exercise to feel better, but rather a powerful way to release God's intervention in the world.

Transcript

Matthew chapter 6, and at the end of our last session, I introduced this section that is verses 1 through 18, where there are three subject matters that Jesus discusses in a very symmetrical way. Even though there are three subjects, he has one principal subject. The principal subject is not to be a hypocrite in your religion, not to do things that are essentially intended to be God-ward in such a way that you're really doing them man-ward, to be seen by men and to be appreciated by men.

And he gives examples of giving charitable gifts, of prayer, and of fasting. Now, giving charitable gifts and prayer and fasting were all things that the Old Testament spoke of. They were in one sense legislated, but they were not the kind of thing you can really legislate like some other things can be, without them turning into something other than a spiritual thing.

For example, sacrifices were very heavily legislated. We have seven chapters at the beginning of Leviticus telling exactly how to offer your sacrifice and what the procedure was and how to be done. How to be this kind of animal, not that kind.

How to be just so old. How to be male, not female. How to have all these things.

And how to be done just so often. And it was very regimented and very regulated. Likewise, the moral laws in general were pretty inflexible.

Murder and adultery and stealing are all wrong whenever they happen and you should

never do them. But there were issues that have to do with the heart. Issues like fasting and prayer and giving.

When you give, and the Bible makes it very clear in the Old Testament that people should give to the poor, there is no set amount. And some people give very little, some give a lot. Jesus indicated that the woman who gave two pence gave actually more than a Pharisee who gave a great larger sum because hers represented a larger percentage of what she owned.

But no certain percentage is designated as what must be given. Obviously, the measure of giving is the measure of the generosity of one's heart. Likewise, prayer and fasting, there is no regulation given.

The Pharisees fasted twice a day. The law only required fasting once a year on the Day of Atonement. The disciples of John, probably following the Pharisee practice, fasted twice a day, but Jesus' disciples generally did not, although he did have some things to say about them fasting.

Yes, twice a week, two days a week. I said twice a day. You could fast twice a day, as a matter of fact.

You could skip two meals a day and that would be fasting twice a day. But that's not what they did. They fasted two days per week.

And yet that was not legislated. The more a person fasted, the more a person gave, the more a person prayed, one would instinctively feel, the more it exhibits a heart for God. We tell Christians that you ought to pray every day, and of course you should.

But there's not any law in the Bible that says you should pray every day. There's no command in the Scripture that says pray without ceasing, which would certainly seem to mean pray every day, but that can't be understood the way that many people try to understand it. That is, when discussing the prayer without ceasing, many preachers say, well, that means you should be in an attitude of prayer all the time, and that in a sense you are then praying at all times.

However, this simply cannot be the meaning because you do not, for example, pray in your sleep. And therefore, even if you were praying all the time that you're awake, you would cease praying for the time being when you went to sleep. And if someone said, well, you could be in an attitude of prayer while you're asleep too, but I don't see how anyone could determine that.

Very few people have control over what state of mind they're in during their sleep. Obviously, when Paul said pray without ceasing, he must have meant something other than that you must at every moment be praying, and you should never stop praying, because you must stop praying at times. I mean, you can't be consciously praying, and if

someone says, well, you're unconsciously praying, what in the world is that? I don't know if the Bible has any reference to unconscious praying.

Conscious prayer is when you consciously present your requests to God and your worship to God. Now, your life can be exemplary of a spirit of prayer or of worship, but that's not the same thing as praying. When Paul said, as he said more than once, he said that he prays without ceasing for the Roman Christians in Romans chapter 1, and of course he says in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 that we should pray without ceasing.

And I believe there's another place he says essentially the same thing. I understand him to mean there that you should not stop praying for a thing just because it has not yet been answered. In other words, if I'm praying for the salvation of a loved one, and I pray every day, and they don't get saved, I might be inclined to stop praying for them.

I would cease praying for them in such a case. And Paul says, don't. Don't stop praying.

Don't cease to pray. To pray without ceasing can either mean that you are in the act of prayer continuously, which is not very realistic, it may be an ideal, and it certainly may be that you walk in a spirit of prayer and live your life in a spirit of prayer, but that's not praying. Paul says to pray without ceasing.

Or it can either mean that you are continuously in one unbroken prayer forever, all your whole life, even when you go to sleep, or it means that you do not give up, you do not cease your habit of prayer, you do not stop praying for somebody simply because your prayers have not quickly been answered. It's all the more reason to continue praying for them. And therefore, praying without ceasing would be more of an exhortation to not lose heart in prayer, and not to abandon the habit of prayer, and so forth.

But it would not necessarily tell you how frequently you must pray. I remember reading in my youth, in my teens and early 20s, about great heroes of the faith, men like Wesley, and George Mueller, and Hudson Taylor, and of course, Reese Howells, and E. M. Bounds, and even Luther, and some people like that. And you read of their prayer lives, and it was very embarrassing, because your own prayer life, if you read these men's lives, usually you'd have to admit, most of us would have to admit, it's not very comparable.

The men I just mentioned, generally speaking, prayed anywhere between two and four hours each day. In the case of E. M. Bounds, I think he got up to about eight or ten hours a day when he was older. And that's a lot of praying.

That's a lot of time praying. If anyone approached praying without ceasing, in the most literal sense of that word, these men came closer than most of us do. And I always felt kind of convicted that, well, I guess that's what a spiritual man does.

A spiritual man prays at least two to four hours every morning. And Wesley had to get up at, what, four in the morning or something like that to get his prayers in. And I think

Luther was the one who said that he's so busy and has so many things to do every day that he can't possibly start the day without two hours of prayer or more.

So you read all these stories about these men who spend so much time in prayer every day, and you begin to set in your mind a standard and say, well, this is spirituality. A person who's moderately spiritual will pray two hours a day. And as you get increasingly more spiritual, you'll pray maybe four, six, eight hours a day.

Who knows? And that was very frustrating to me because I attempted doing this myself on many occasions. It was very common. It was customary for me to rise at four in the morning throughout almost all my years as a single man.

And I would attempt to devote myself to hours of prayer, but it often was the case that I did not. And it's not even so much that I fell back asleep, as people commonly talk. You know, I got up early to pray and I fell asleep.

Well, sometimes I'd fall asleep, but I got accustomed to waking early, so it wasn't so much a problem finding sleep. It was wandering thoughts. It was running out of ideas of what I should pray for and so forth.

And it was very frustrating to me because I never really ended up praying for more than ten or twenty minutes, it seemed like, at a sitting. And I felt, boy, I must be terribly unspiritual. And I just thought, I'd better just pray for a spirit of prayer.

I'd better pray for a breakthrough in this area. I will say to you that I have spent hours in prayer on occasions when it really seemed like that's how the spirit was moving, and when it really was praying in the spirit. It seems to me the more important thing than how long you pray is in whom you pray.

You're told, we're told continuously to pray in the spirit. And that would have to mean that we're praying with the energizing and guidance of the Holy Spirit. And I have a feeling that there are times when the Holy Spirit puts a burden of prayer upon a heart that takes hours to unload.

Other times there's not a comparable burden, and to pray for hours would end up being more in the flesh, perhaps. I don't know. All I can say is that I gave up measuring my prayer life against other men's prayer lives after about ten years of that kind of frustration, and decided that there's really nothing very bad.

I don't have any complaints about my relationship with God, my prayer life, or whatever. The only thing that made me complain about it was reading about other people's prayer lives. And I realized that I was measuring spirituality by the number of minutes or hours a day that a person prayed, just like sometimes people measure parenting by how many minutes or hours a day you spend with each of your children.

You sometimes hear these statistics intended to shame parents, because they say, well, the average father spends a total of, you know, 75 seconds with each of his children per day in private conversation. And, you know, I look at myself and I say, well, sometimes it is that low. In fact, sometimes it's less than that, because sometimes I'm gone for a week and don't see them at all or talk to them in a day.

But that's not really a true measure of relationship. Because, first of all, I spend a lot of time with my whole family together. And each child who has something they want to say has an opportunity to say it, and there's plenty of open and free conversation.

I may not, in a certain day, spend so much as a minute talking privately to one of my children, but their needs may not be such that they desire or need private conversation in that sense. But in another day they may get more time. And it gets scary when you begin to try to determine, by time periods in conversation, the quality of a relationship.

Some of my very best friends whom I have, you know, were really kindred spirits and have known each other for years and years, and I certainly regard them my closest friends, I don't talk to them every month. Some of them I talk to three or four times a year. And yet, because of the kind of friendship we have, our relationship is strong, it's stable, it is close.

Obviously, the more you converse with a person, the more specific, up-to-date facts about what they're doing you will know, but knowing what someone's doing isn't the same thing as knowing the person. And so, you know, relationships are not measured in minutes of time of conversation. And likewise, your relationship with God is not measured in the number of minutes you spend in prayer or hours you spend in prayer.

Obviously, your spirituality would be more measured in whether you are drawn to prayer generally, whether you are drawn to God, whether you have a heart of dependence upon God. And because of that heart of dependence upon God, you naturally speak to God at all times. And, you know, you read the book of Nehemiah, and he's a very interesting example of prayer.

Because the book of Nehemiah is, to a certain extent, Nehemiah just narrating in the first person his own experiences. And as he encounters various challenges and opposition, you'll find him say, Oh, God, remember me, and remember my faithfulness to you, and don't let them win over me, and so forth. And he'll just shoot up a prayer now and then throughout his book.

It's just his style of praying. He was kind of conversational with God. He may well have observed hours of prayer as well, but we don't know that he did, and it's not necessary to believe that he did.

A relationship is a relationship, and God is a person, and you're a person, and therefore

the way you and God converse and the way you and he relate will not be exactly the same as the way someone else does. And Jesus, I think, is addressing the matter, several matters, that people could easily look at the quantity in these matters. How much do you give to the poor? How much time do you spend in prayer? How many days per month do you really fast? And we typically think that the answers to these questions are going to be given in numbers, and that the numbers will tell us how spiritual we are.

And this is, I know, the case if somebody says, well, did you spend some time in prayer today? And I say, oh, some time in prayer? No, I don't recall that I did spend some time in prayer today. But I feel a little embarrassed to say so, because I realize that I feel that by saying something like that, I'm admitting to a low degree of spirituality. Similarly, although Jesus doesn't give this example, if someone says, well, how much time do you read your Bible every day? Well, I don't know.

I don't regulate that. I read my Bible whenever I can get a chance, you know. Sometimes that's maybe only a few minutes in a day.

Sometimes that might be a couple of hours. Some days I might not read it at all, because I'm busy from the time I get up. Now some people say, oh, no, you've got to take time aside for God.

Well, this idea of taking time aside for God is perhaps a good idea if you find that he's not getting any of your time otherwise. But there's such a thing as giving God all of your time and meditating day and night on the Word of God and maintaining a spirit of piety and walking in the Spirit all the time so that you read your Bible and you pray and you give gifts to the poor and you fast exactly as often as it seems appropriate in your relationship with God in a given day. My wife and I, when we got married, did not decide that, okay, we will spend one half hour together every morning in private conversation and one half hour before bed in private conversation.

Now, my wife would probably appreciate that. But there are times that we spend more, much more time than that, and there's times when we actually don't get that much time. And, you know, it wouldn't be realistic.

We have a relationship that has to be able to be strong even if we happen to, if I'm away some day and we don't talk at all that day. It doesn't mean the relationship is on the rocks. If it does, then the relationship is not a very good one in the first place.

Now, the things that Jesus is speaking of here are those kinds of things that if someone says, well, how much do you give to the poor? How much do you pray? How much do you fast? There's a good possibility that your first reaction will be one of embarrassment because you might realize, well, I haven't prayed as much as I today or yesterday or this week as I sometimes do. And, of course, you may wonder, I may not pray anywhere near as much as this person does. I mean, if the person who's asking prays an hour a day and

I spent only 15 minutes, I'm not sure that I'll be comfortable answering him because he might be judging my spirituality by that question.

And because people tend to judge spirituality by these issues, there's the temptation to do them for the simple reason of pleasing those people who will think you're spiritual for doing it, doing it more and more ostentatiously than you ordinarily would if it was natural, if it was really springing from a real relationship with God, so that you end up doing what you do to be seen by men. And that's what Jesus is really addressing here. When you give your charitable deeds, when you pray, when you fast, don't do it to be seen by men because you will not have the reward that is really potentially yours through this activity if you do it for other motives.

You will not have the reward that God wants you to have, your reward in heaven, he says in verse 1 of chapter 6, he says, otherwise you'll have no reward from your father in heaven. On the other hand, of course, there is a proper place for these activities. It would be impossible to say for every person, there's not a one-size-fits-all answer to the question, how much should you give to the poor? Stewardship is a personal matter.

Paul said in Romans chapter 14, who are you, O man, to judge another man's servant? To his own master he will stand or fall. That's Romans 14, 4. And a steward is a servant. We are stewards of God's things.

Now, in the Old Testament, there were, of course, the tithes that had to be offered. And a portion of these were given to the poor. But for the most part, the tithes were for the support of the Levites.

The Levites probably couldn't eat all the food and the priests couldn't eat all the food that was brought to them. And so after their support was taken from it and their needs, then the poor were able to eat from the surplus. In addition to that, there were, of course, beggars around with their cups and hands out, and people were expected to give to the poor.

The Old Testament says that very plainly. Of course, there's quite a bit about that in the book of Proverbs, as we've observed earlier when we were talking about being merciful. But there's actually a law in Deuteronomy that requires helping the poor.

It's not just it's a nice thing to do, it's a command of God. In Deuteronomy 15, verse 7 and following, it says, If there is among you a poor man of your brethren within any of the gates of your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. Beware, lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand, and your eye be evil against your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the Lord against you, and it becomes sin among you.

You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. For the poor will never cease from the land. Therefore I command you, saying, You shall open your hand wide to your brother and your poor and your needy in the land.

Now, does this say how much to give? It does not. It says open your hand wide. It says lend him sufficient for what he needs, in verse 8. The important thing is it says you shall do it willingly, in verse 8. And your hand and your heart is to be open to him.

Your eye should not be evil against him. Now, the evil eye is a Hebrew expression that means greedy, as we shall see in another place, because Jesus uses that same expression later in chapter 6 of Matthew, in another connection. But what Moses is saying is there will always be poor people among you.

Now, Jesus also said the same thing. The poor you have with you always. And some people have thought from that that we should not consider ourselves indebted to do much to alleviate poverty, because Jesus said the poor you have with you always.

It's sort of like saying we shouldn't take a stand against war, because Jesus said there will be wars and rumors of wars to the very end. Actually, Jesus never did say there will be wars and rumors of wars to the very end. They mistakenly think that all of the discourse where he spoke of wars and rumors of wars is about the very end, which it is not.

But the point is, even if it were, the argument is fallacious. What if Jesus did say there will be wars and rumors of wars to the end? Does that mean that we might as well just participate in the wars and do nothing to try to promote peace? And if Jesus said you'll always have the poor among you, does that mean, well, I might as well just live with that fact? There will always be poor, no one can fix it. Might as well just let them be poor and just live and let live and enjoy the prosperity God's given us.

Well, actually, when Jesus said the poor you have with you always, his next statement was, and you can give to them whenever you will. Jesus did not assume that since the poor will always exist, there is no reason to do things to alleviate their condition. There is always that one poor person for whom it will make a great difference.

Like the old starfish illustration, the man who was out on the beach and he saw a man out there, this beach was covered with starfishes that had been all washed ashore and were dying on the sand. The tide had gone out and left them stranded up on shore and they were dying there. And there was some guy who had gotten out there early, was picking them one by one and tossed them like frisbees back into the waves.

But there were zillions of them out on the sand. And this man who was observing this

came and said to the man who was throwing the starfish in, he said, well, what possible difference can that make? There's millions of them, you'll never get them back all into the ocean. And the guy had a starfish in his hand at that moment, flung it into the water and said, it makes a difference to that one.

And it does, it makes a difference to one or two or whoever you can help. You cannot necessarily, through your resources alone, end world poverty. But you can alleviate the suffering of one poor person or two or ten or however many, God may prosper you to be able to help.

Now we live in a time where the needs of the poor are compressing upon our consciousness in a way that in ancient times they could not. Because, for example, if there's a famine in India or Bangladesh or somewhere, you know, we know about it over here. But in biblical times, people living in this part of the world would not know of any famines on the other side of the world.

Because they wouldn't even know that the other side of the world existed, and if they did, it would take months to get news about it. But we are bombarded continually with awareness of wars and poverty and plagues and things all over the world. And when we learn of world poverty, and it is a great problem, we obviously wonder here what our obligation is about world poverty.

Jesus did indicate that giving alms or doing charitable deeds is a Christian activity. It should be done unto the Lord, not to be seen by men, but it should be done. But to what extent? There was a book written by Ronald Sider years ago, back I think it was around the late 70s, must have been around 78 or 79 I guess, called Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger.

And basically the book indicated that of course it's an injustice, he said, that so many in the world are starving, and yet others, including Christians in the western world are so affluent. And have so much extra, and that so little is being done to change it. He actually argued for changes in governmental structure and almost sounded like it promoted a socialist idea that there should be a governmental redistribution of the wealth and so forth.

I'm not sure that he was advocating that, but it sort of sounded like it. There were some people who certainly believed he was. His book was called Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger.

A man named David Chilton, now deceased, wrote a rebuttal to that book called Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators. And basically saying, you know, everything that Ronald Sider said about the poor, you know, is just trying to manipulate us with guilt and make us feel guilty for being productive. You know, like Ron Sider would say, well, how is it that the United States has only 5% of the world's population but

consumes, I forget what the figure is, 75% of the world's food? Does that seem fair? America's 5% of the world's population consumes 75% of the world's food or something like that, it might have been 50%, I forget.

And it does sound, when you put it that way, very unfair. But it's not really all that simple. Just like when you see a person on the street who comes up to you and he's a drunkard, and he comes up to you and says, could you give me a dollar for a cup of coffee? And you suspect he might not buy a cup of coffee with that dollar.

And you say, well, what should I do? And you're not so sure he even needs coffee as much as he might need something else. You might be willing to give him a dollar or more for something profitable, but you're not so sure that giving him a dollar and letting him walk off with it when you suspect he might buy some more alcohol with it is a good stewardship of your money. And it's not that you shouldn't do anything for such a man, but the question is, what should you do for him? Is giving him the money he's asking for the most charitable and helpful thing to do to him? Would it be better to take him aside and talk to him about his life patterns, that if he continues them, he'll continually have to be asking for a dollar and a dollar and a dollar.

And he's not working, maybe. He's wasting his money on alcohol or something. I'm not saying you shouldn't help a person like that.

The question is how. And it's not so easy as just saying, well, here's a poor person, give him something. Here's a beggar, give him something.

We do, as Christians, have a desire because love compels us to do something. It says, if you have this world's good and see that your brother have need and shut up your bowels of compassion from him, how does the love of God dwell in you? John said that in 1 John, and James said something similar. He said, if you see a brother naked or destitute of daily food and you say, be warmed and filled, but you don't give them anything needed for the body, what does it profit? So it's very clear that Christians are to be moved as Jesus was moved with compassion and do something about it for the plight of people.

But it's not so simple as saying, well, this is an injustice. Americans eat 75% of the world's food and have only 5% of the population. What is not stated there in that figure is that Americans produce maybe 85 or 95% of the world's food and support poor nations to a large extent.

And it's true, a lot of Americans overeat. Although, by the way, overeating is not stated in the Bible to be a sin. Gluttony is, and that would be sort of idolatry of food.

And there is an overeating that becomes sin, but it's the fashion of our age that says that being fat is a sin. I mean, we like thin bodies these days, it happens to be in vogue. But the Bible says the righteous should be made fat.

In other words, we'll prosper. Now, I'm not into the prosperity doctrine at all, not in the least. And I'm not into prospering either.

It's not a goal of mine. But I'm just into evaluating things on a biblical basis. Maybe a lot of Americans do eat way too much.

But I'm not sure that all Americans do. I know I don't. I have to remind myself to eat, or I'll sell you only one or two meals a day if that, because I'm too busy to remember to eat.

And I imagine there's a lot of people like me. I mean, I don't feel guilty that I live in a country that eats so much food. We have a lot of people.

The problem is, why aren't the other nations producing so much food? Why is it America produces more, and it's the breadbasket of the whole world? Well, one reason is, of course, just natural things. God has given us a very productive land, a land that has the capability of producing. There's some other factors too.

One of the factors is that this is a free land, or has been. It's been less so all the time. But it used to be that a person could produce as much as he wanted, and the surplus he could make a profit on, and he could reinvest or whatever.

And frankly, although the Bible doesn't discuss capitalism per se, it certainly seems that things go better in a society where people are free to use their capital to produce more and export more and so forth. Whereas in most of the countries that have been really poor, they have some kind of a socialist or communist state in many cases. Not all of them, but many of them.

And even when Americans send shiploads and plane loads and truckloads and trainloads of food to these people, the poor remain just as poor and hungry as before because the government, in so many cases, takes the food and does with it what they want. They might trade it for weapons, they might do something else. But in many cases, it's not the fault of the Americans.

In fact, America is the most generous country that's ever been around, really. I'm not here to wave a flag and talk about patriotism. I'm just saying that America has definitely been the most generous country that's ever been around as far as feeding not only the world, but feeding our enemies and rebuilding our enemies after wars that have been had together and so forth.

I mean, America is the most forgiving and the most generous country that's ever existed. That may be changing, I don't know. But I'm saying that a lot of countries, the problems are socioeconomic, they are political, in some cases they're religious.

I mean, it is pointed out by Ron Sider that, I forget exactly what, but we feed our cattle enough corn to keep several people alive in India. And, you know, because we like our

corn-fed beef. And if we would just stop doing that and export this corn to people, we could keep people alive instead of cows.

Now, that sounds like a very good argument. And perhaps there's some validity in it. The thing is, we do ship out a lot of corn, possibly enough to feed the world.

One of the problems is, though, in Hindu lands, where they believe in reincarnation, they believe that rats are sacred. Any living thing is sacred. It might be a reincarnation of, you know, my great-grandfather.

And so you don't kill animals. You don't kill rats. And the rats eat probably more corn in India than the cows eat in America.

And the people don't get them because they won't kill the rats because their religion oppresses them from this. They won't kill their cows either. They've got a fair number of those over there.

But they won't kill any of their cows either. It is, in that case, a religious problem. So, I'm not saying we don't need to help the poor and try to alleviate world poverty.

I believe we should be working in that direction. But the question is not, what is, you know, how much money should I give? The question is, what can I do to help alleviate poverty? What is the real cause? Is the real cause of poverty that I, an American, am consuming too much? I might be. I need to look at that possibility.

But there's a real possibility that I may not be. And yet, the reason that many people are poor, and this doesn't mean that we shouldn't have compassion on them anyway, because even if it's their own fault, it's probably blindness or some other thing for which we should have compassion. But the reason many people are poor is because of their lifestyles, their religious styles, the socio-economic-political situation they live in, the way that wealth is distributed.

And in our own country, of course, almost everyone who's poor is poor because of habits. Chosen habits. Drug habit, alcohol, laziness, refusal to work, whatever.

There are poor people in this country who are, let's say, disabled. But even in this country, a person who's mentally disabled can work at a hamburger-flipping joint. I'm sure all of you have discovered.

There's very few, not that you're mentally disabled, I mean, you've probably encountered such people. There are jobs, and if not jobs, there's disability pay and so forth. There's no reason why anyone in this country has to be poor.

But when you find someone who's poor, I'm not saying you shouldn't help them, but you need to realize that giving them money isn't going to solve their problem in many cases.

There are reasons for their poverty that are different than the reasons for the poverty of people in third world countries who can't grow something on their land because there's been no rain for ten years. There are people like that that we need to do everything we can to help because they may be hardworking people of the land, but there's no water, the soil's depleted, the government confiscates everything they have, or whatever.

We need to have compassion for these people and do what we can. But sometimes that means praying for those in authority, sometimes that means evangelizing people out of their religious beliefs that keep them from being able to steward their food properly, and so forth. The question of course is, what is my responsibility for world poverty? In Deuteronomy it says, if there is among you a poor man of your brethren within any of the gates of your land, and then it says you need to give to him, it sounds like local poverty is what he's talking about here.

Now that might only be because in those days without mass communication, the local world was the whole world for them. I mean, they didn't have awareness of anything beyond what was going on within the gates of their town and neighborhood. It's possible that in God's sight, since we have television telling us everything that's going on all over the world, that the gates of our land have been expanded to include the whole world.

But Christians can become very guilty and can be manipulated by guilt to do unreasonable things and unbiblical things when we see how poor some parts of the world are and how comfortable we are. Now we may get our turn, believe me. I have a feeling we are not too far away from a time when we will get our turn to know discomfort and to know shortages and so forth.

And yet it doesn't mean that it is wrong for us to have lived with enough to eat. But certainly the heart of the Christian is seeking the heart of God as to what to do for the plight of the poor. Anyone whose heart does not go out to the poor and is not moved to want to do something practical, something down to earth that will really help, is not much of a Christian.

How dwells the love of God in you? If your bowels of compassion are closed against your brother who is poor. Now when it comes to giving to the poor, it should also be understood that there are priorities. I mentioned that last time.

In Galatians 6.10, Paul said, as we have opportunity, we should endeavor to do good to all men, but especially those in the household of faith. And as you read the Bible, you will find that there are certain places where a person is obligated to help certain people as a priority. A man is to care for those in his own household, for example.

If he doesn't do that, he is denied the faith and he is worse than an infidel. It would seem that the first priority in giving or in spending or in stewarding finances would be toward those for whom you are responsible in your home. Now in the context that Paul says that

in 1 Timothy 5, he is actually not talking about your children, he is talking about your parents.

You are responsible for your aged parents and if a person doesn't supply for his household, meaning his parents, he is denied the faith and worse than an infidel. But it would also follow that anyone who is dependent on you that God has put into your family and you are in the natural position to be the provider for them, they have first claim, at least on their needs. And then of course the Christian community at large.

And within the Christian community at large, of course, there are those in ministry, the missionaries, the pastors, the teachers. It says in Galatians 6.6 that those who are taught in the word share with those who teach in all good things. And Paul said of himself in 1 Corinthians 9, if we have ministered to you in spiritual things, it's no great thing if we would reap of your material things.

Although Paul said he was not asking for money and he was willing to work rather than to be supported by the ministry, he was pointing out that this was a concession he did not have to make if he wished he could require pay, because God had ordained that those who preach the gospel should live of the gospel. And that being so, we can see that here are some of the priorities. If a person has money, where should it be given? Well, first, to whatever family members are in need, whether aged parents or dependent children.

Secondly, to those within the body of Christ who have need, especially those in ministry and of course any other poor in the body of Christ. Beyond that, there is of course the needs of the poor in general out there, all men, especially the household of faith, but all men too. And once our missionary giving has been done and our charity has been given to those who are in the body of Christ, our brothers, if there is more, and there often can be, then there are other poor people to be concerned about as well.

Now, if you don't have a lot of money to give, or the amount you have to give doesn't seem like it's going to go very far toward ending world poverty, you can realize that preaching the gospel and making disciples of all men is giving them true riches, and it may even lead to their prosperity at a higher level if they turn to the ways of God. John Wesley complained that there was a vicious cycle that he did not know how to break. He said, when a man becomes a Christian, he usually becomes wealthy, and when he becomes wealthy, he often becomes carnal.

He said he didn't know how to make this not happen. He said if a person becomes a good Christian, then he gives up his wasteful habits, he doesn't go out and buy all kinds of extravagant things, he stops spending money on booze and cigarettes and drugs or whatever else he was wasting money on before, and even on entertainment and things like that, he doesn't go for extravagant clothing and fancy cars like he used to. I mean, he has different values.

Therefore, his spending habits become more reasonable, more frugal. But at the same time, he works harder, because that is part of one's reasonable service to God, that you labor and you present your body as a living sacrifice and your members as instruments of righteousness, and you work in your job as unto the Lord and not as unto men, so that while other employees take longer coffee breaks than the average, the Christian worker may forget to take a coffee break because he is so eager to be productive as a testimony to the Lord and to do his job unto the Lord. And eventually, the increased diligence and industry of the conscientious Christian, coupled with his diminished extravagant spending, can hardly keep him from prospering.

And once he prospers, there is that old danger, it's hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And even a man who has already entered can go out, can slip away, can be drawn aside by the deceitfulness of riches. Riches are a great temptation.

Wesley said this happened again and again, he didn't know how to make it not happen. You make a man into a good Christian, he prospers, then his prosperity cools him spiritually, or worse. Well, I don't know, I don't have quite as much experience as Wesley, so I don't want to speak as if I know more, but it does seem like if a person is a good Christian and prospers, he can also prove himself a good Christian by his giving.

And if a person gives enough, he will not be living in a great deal of prosperity, because whatever he does not need, whatever is not reasonable for him to possess while others are in need, he will divest himself of and give to the poor. I do believe that godly living increases prosperity, not because of some magic of the word of faith, where you just confess it and you believe it and you get it. It's more reasonable than that.

It's just because habits change, and the kinds of habits that change are the kind that lead to greater prosperity. But when that prosperity comes, then it is to be stewarded for God. It is God who gives the five talents in the beginning, and it is God who gives the increase to have another five talents.

And it's his money from beginning to end, and it is for his purposes from beginning to end. That's why Jesus said, if a man comes to me and doesn't forsake all that he has, he cannot be my disciple. All is forsaken for Christ, because he is the master and we are the servants, he owns us and he owns our possessions, therefore whatever we spend should be as we believe he wants us to spend it.

And there are some, even churches, that are very poor stewards of the money, that is God's money that they put in their hands, and they spend it on frivolous things. But one thing that Jesus clearly indicated he was interested in, money being spent on, was the needs of the poor. Let me show you a couple of other places where Jesus expressed a concern about that.

In Matthew 19, Jesus is speaking to the rich young ruler. In Matthew 19, 21, he says, if

you want to be perfect, go sell the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me. Notice, sell what you have and give it to the poor.

It's not just that you having money is bad for you, but righteousness, in your case, requires not only getting your idolatry of things rooted out, but also doing something for the poor. In Luke chapter 12, in verse 33, Jesus said to his disciples, sell what you have and give alms. Provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, for no thief approaches nor moth destroys.

Earlier, in chapter 11 of Luke, Luke chapter 11, in verse 41, Jesus said, but rather give alms of such things as you have, alms means charitable gifts, then indeed all things are clean to you. So, there are many times Jesus indicated that we should give to the poor, and Paul repeated this, I already mentioned James, and John repeated it, it's a major theme of scripture, Proverbs says it a great deal, Psalms says it as well, even the prophets frequently make reference to the need to show compassion to the poor. So, when Jesus said, when you give alms, he expected that you would.

Now, in addition to that, he went on and talked about prayer, and just as alms is supposed to be an expression of generosity, prayer is supposed to be an expression of piety, or devoutness, or love of God. Both of these things, as Jesus points out, can be done for entirely different motives than that, and the purity as well as the quantity of money given, or of prayer time spent, are significant in being sort of reflectors or barometers of generosity and piety. Now, Jesus says the same kind of thing about prayer that he says about generosity, he says, don't be like the hypocrites, don't do it to be seen by men, when you pray, be more private about it, secretive, make sure that you're praying in such a way that only God is the one you're seeking a reward from, not man.

But then Jesus goes beyond this. On the subject of prayer, he says a great deal more than he says either on giving alms or what he says about fasting. There's an added section that's more like a parenthesis that expands on this teaching on prayer before he goes on to talk about fasting.

That's in verses 7-15, he says, when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore be not like them, for your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask him. In this manner, therefore, pray, our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. These last two verses about forgiveness are not technically about prayer. They are an expansion on something that he included in the prayer, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

He wants to clarify that that's an essential thing, the part about forgiving your debtors. If you want God to forgive your debts, you need to forgive your debtors. But, technically, verses 14 and 15 aren't so much about prayer as they are about forgiveness and mercy, and we always spoke about that when we talked about the beatitude, blessed are the merciful, they shall obtain mercy.

But on prayer, in addition to his teaching about the need to do this unto the Lord, not unto man, there are at least a couple of other things of interest we need to point out. One is that you're not only, when you pray, told to not be like the hypocrites, that is the Pharisees, but you're also told not to be like the heathen. There's two wrong ways of praying, at least, and two wrong attitudes of prayer.

The Pharisees' wrong attitude was that they prayed to God, sort of, but they were really praying for the ears of people, not for the ears of God. That's one mistake. I remember hearing a story about Leonard Ravenhill and David Wilkerson, who used to live near each other in Texas.

Leonard Ravenhill is now dead, and David Wilkerson has now moved to New York, but when these men were living close to each other, they would get together and pray sometimes. David Wilkerson was a Pentecostal, and Leonard Ravenhill was not a Pentecostal, and had never spoken in tongues. And they were praying together, and a woman came into the room while they were praying, who was also Pentecostal, and she joined them for prayer.

They've been praying for a while, and she comes in and she starts going off, but, Oh Lord, please bless Brother Ravenhill with the baptism of the Holy Spirit, with the gift of tongues, and help him to know that he has a need for this, and help him not to have mental blocks against this that would keep him from receiving. And Lord, please convince him that he needs this, and Leonard Ravenhill stopped praying, and went, Excuse me, Sister, we're praying this way, not that way, pointing up the first time and toward each other the second time. You know, when we pray here, we're praying this way, toward God.

We're not praying that way, toward each other. And it was clear that her prayers were directed for the ears of Leonard Ravenhill, not the ears of God. She might have, in her heart, thought she was praying to God, but that's so often the case when we pray when others are around.

There's a self-consciousness about whether our prayers sound very spiritual, or whether

we're getting across to the person through the disguise of prayer, a small sermonette. In either case, of course, the persons in the room are much too much on our mind in our selection of words and praying. Now, this is sometimes hard to avoid, and if it's impossible to pray with other people without having these concerns, then Jesus said, Go into your closet, shut the door, and do it all by yourself with God.

Then you won't have those temptations. On the other hand, of course, there's nothing wrong with praying in the presence of other people. But the Pharisees, they wanted to make sure everyone thought they were spiritual, so they prayed publicly.

But the heathen had their own problem, the pagans. They had their own misunderstandings of prayer. First of all, their prayers were not to any real beings.

They worshipped idols. The idols couldn't hear them anyway. There's no way that anyone could be said to have had a relationship with an idol.

A pagan couldn't have a relationship with his God. Therefore, prayer to the pagan could never be what prayer is to a person who knows God. Because to a person who knows God, prayer is talking to somebody that you have a relationship with, to your king, to your lord, to your friend.

Obviously, when you talk to your friends, you don't just chatter on with meaningless repetitions. You don't just repeat the same petition over and over again. You don't chant to your friends.

But since the pagans didn't have a friend in their God, they only had an idol, their prayers were simply religious exercises. One of the things they apparently believed was that you should repeat your prayers over and over and over again, possibly in rapid succession. A practice that resembles somewhat that which the Roman Catholics are known to do with their Hail Marys and their rosaries and their Our Fathers.

They say, as you know, I'm sure, if a Catholic person goes to confession with a priest, there's a good chance the priest is going to prescribe a certain number of Hail Marys and a certain number of Our Fathers, as they call it. It's what Protestants usually call the Lord's Prayer, to be recited. And usually, after the Catholic has gotten that prescription from the priest, they go off and they do that as rapidly as possible, so it might not intrude too much into their day.

And I've heard them at times tell me that when they say ten Our Fathers, they just go through it so fast that you hardly can understand the distinct words. It's easy to quote something you know real well so fast that the words all slur together and you get it over fast. But of course, that's not praying.

And if you do it ten times or twenty times or fifty times, you're not praying any more by repeating it than you were by doing it the first time. But if it's not sincere, if there's not a

relationship there with God, if prayer is not an actual presentation of your request to a God whom you know, then your repetition of words doesn't enhance it at all. And the heathen know that their God doesn't hear them the first time, because their gods don't have ears that can hear.

And so they just figure the power is in the repetition, in the chanting of it. And this is a wrong notion of prayer. Jesus indicated that prayer doesn't have to be lengthy, hence it is not legitimate to judge your prayer life by how many hours you spend in prayer, since Jesus said it's not your many words.

And when Jesus gave the model prayer, it was very short. You could probably say it in twenty seconds, at a reasonable clip. And, you know, you could say it, in fact, so quickly and so easy to memorize that you could say it without thinking about it, which is another mistake you could make, you know.

But what Jesus is saying is that your prayer needs to be genuinely a request made by a child to a father with faith, knowing the father well enough to know that he delights to give good things to his children and is eager to hear from you. He doesn't have to be begged by repetitious chanting of requests. He doesn't have to have his arm twisted.

You don't have to make all kinds of bribes to him and say, well, if you do this, I'll do that for you. Here's how you're to pray, he said. First of all, God knows what you have need of before you ask Him.

That's one difference between you and the heathen. The heathen repeat again and again and again, but their God doesn't know what they need, even after they've said it a thousand times, because their God doesn't know anything. But your God knows already.

You don't need to ask again and again. He does want you to ask, but he already knows what you need, Jesus said in verse 8. Now, of course, that raises one question worth asking, and that is, if God already knows what I need before I ask Him, why does He want me to ask? Jesus later says in Matthew 6, 32, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. Well, if God knows I need them, and He knows what I need before I ask, why bother to ask? What's the point of it? And after all, God knows what I really need.

I sometimes don't know what I really need. Isn't there a possibility that I will ask for something that isn't really a good thing to ask for? Isn't it possible that I'll pray for it to be a sunny day, but for reasons unknown to me, God knows it needs to be a rainy day? I mean, who am I to give advice to God? Isn't He capable of running His universe well enough without my advice and my request? If He knows what I need, can't He just automatically give it? Why pray? Why does He want me to do that? Well, apparently, it is because of relationship. I could, of course, if I had the money, set up a private dwelling for all my children and my wife, and give them a debit card to draw from a bank machine, and shove money into the account for that card on a monthly basis, enough to

give them everything they want, and I would provide all their needs that way, and they could just go to the machine and get the money out whenever they needed it.

We'd never have to have any contact at all. But that's not exactly the kind of relationship I'm looking for. My support for my family is a part of the fabric of my relationship with my family.

The reason I support my family and I don't support my next-door neighbor's family is because there isn't that relationship there. And I don't begrudge what it costs to support my family, and I don't do it in exchange for any services or anything from my family. I do it just because that's part of my relationship with them.

But I also want to have the relationship with them, the other parts of it. And if God would simply automatically fill our cupboards, and every day we woke up and the cupboards were full again, and we never had to ask Him for anything, and every time we got a bit of a cold, He healed instantly without our ever asking, and every time anything was a concern to us, without us even asking, God just took care of it, we'd never do any asking. We'd never talk to Him.

There'd be no need to. There'd be no relationship. There'd be no communication.

You see, prayer is really one way that we exercise and express our awareness of our dependency upon God, and that is the nature of our relationship with Him. Our relationship with Him is not a relationship of equals. It's a relationship of pensioners upon a king, servants of a Lord dependent on His feeding them day by day, children of a father.

It's not just pals. It's not just friends. It is a dependency relationship.

And we acknowledge that dependency humbly and gladly when we pray and ask God, God, I need you. I need something from you. He doesn't mind being asked because He knows that that's the nature of our relationship.

If every time I saw you, you asked me for money, I might start taking the long way around the block when I saw you coming, you know, because I wouldn't really welcome that. But when my children have a need, I don't object to them asking because it's the nature of my relationship with them. They're dependent on me.

I want to fill that role, and God wants that relationship with us, and He wants us to ask. You see, asking is not only simply an exercise of the dependency relationship. It also gives us the opportunity to give Him the credit when something is done for us.

If things happen automatically, let me put it this way. I drove down here from my home ten miles today. I did not have any accidents.

Many cars passed me going the other direction on the other side of the road. None of them came into my lane. God protected me, I could say.

But on the other hand, even if there had been no God, I might have gotten here safely, and there might have been no accidents. I don't know. It's really not clear whether there was any potential accident from which I was protected.

I'm not sure whether there was some driver who passed me the other way who was drunk or suicidal and who was looking to kill himself against the grill of somebody else's car. I mean, it could be. But if he was there, I was protected from it.

The angel of the Lord encamps around the righteous. He protects him. And I was protected.

But at the same time, I could say, well, I don't really know that God specifically and actively protected me. Maybe there was no danger. Maybe it's just one of those things where it just wasn't a day where there was anything to be protected from.

And likewise, if things kept materializing for us, all the answers to our problems materialized to us automatically, we would never know whether God was involved or not. But when we have a need, a felt need, and we ask God, and then he meets that need, there's an immediate conscious connection in our mind. Oh, God provided.

That was God's doing, God's hand in my life. Now, there are times, of course, that God anticipates even before we pray and does things that are so remarkable we already recognize it's His hand, even though we didn't bother to ask Him, didn't get around to it. He did it before we could even ask.

And there's no doubt in our mind that God's hand was in it. But how many thousands of things, day by day, our daily bread and so forth, might we be able to provide for ourselves without ever asking God? And yet, God is behind it. God is the one who allows us to live in a land and to have good health and so forth, where we can get jobs and make a living, but we don't see His hand in it when we don't pray as easily.

Prayer is a way of connecting, in our own awareness, the provision with the provider. God could provide without ever drawing attention to Himself, but that's not what He wants. He wants us to recognize that He is acting on our part, for us to have gratitude to Him, for us to have faith in Him.

And prayer is an expression of faith, it is an expression of dependency, and it is that which makes it obvious when God has acted. When I'm praying for something I need and it happens, I say, God has acted. About two days ago, I got an email from someone requesting prayer.

They sent out to a zillion people, and I don't even know if they know me, but I got it

anyway, and it said, please pray. It was, I may have told you this, but it was the Sunday before Easter. And, you know, the Sunday of the triumphal entry.

And a young girl, 12 years old, was kidnapped from a church by a guy in a van. And no one knew where he'd gone or where she was, and they said, please pray. And this person who sent the email also had a prayer that she had, a very powerful, moving prayer that she uttered and sent out too, for us to agree with.

And I agreed with that prayer, and I'm sure many, many thousands or lots of people did. Well, later that same day, she sent out an email saying, praise God, the girl was found. And she was all tied up and stuff, and she had been molested, but she was not dead.

And then a few days later, another email, the man was caught, and now he's in jail and so forth. And all these things were things that were in the original prayer. Prayed for her to be found, prayed for her not to be killed, prayed for the guy to be caught, and the prayers were answered.

Now, to me, I have no doubt that that girl is safe today because those prayers were offered up. And because prayers are offered of a specific sort, it is possible to see the specific fulfillments. And then God gets the glory for what might otherwise have just thought to be a matter of history running its course.

Because it is the specific thing prayed for that occurs, we cannot help but give God the credit for it. And that is another reason why, although God knows what we need, He desires for us to pray. Now, Jesus said, in this manner, therefore, pray.

And we know this prayer very well. It really consists of a very small number of petitions. Some of them are essentially equivalent to each other.

It has the kind of parallelism in it that you'd find in Hebrew poetry. It's almost poetic. It is, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

This is simply a respectful way of opening the prayer. God is referred to as the one in heaven, the one who has a hallowed name, the one who has an exalted name. It is, in other words, an attitude of reverence that is acknowledged and of smallness in the presence of God.

At the same time, it is addressed to a father. It's not, O great and revered God, higher than all other heavens and all other gods. It is Our Father.

By the way, notice it isn't Jesus. Jesus didn't say, When you pray, say, Dear Jesus. Jesus never taught that we are to pray to him.

I don't know that there's anything wrong with praying to Jesus. And we find in two cases in the Scripture there are prayers uttered to Jesus. Stephen, when he was being stoned

and he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father, he said, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And the last prayer in the Bible is uttered by John to Jesus, Even so, come, Lord Jesus. The only two prayers in the Bible to Jesus. All other prayers are uttered to the Father.

Interestingly enough, Stephen's prayer and the prayer in Revelation both occurred when these men saw Jesus in vision. So it was quite natural for them to speak to Jesus in this way. But there certainly can't be anything wrong with speaking to Jesus.

It is not forbidden anywhere, but Jesus never taught us to pray to him. He always taught us to pray to the Father. And given the fact that most of us realize our prayer life could be improved, one simple way to improve it in many cases would be simply to pray to the person that Jesus said to pray to, instead of someone else.

So Jesus said, when you pray, say, Our Father in heaven. By referring to God as our Father, of course, it brings a whole host of images that Jesus intended to bring. A father is one upon whom a child is dependent.

A father is one who is committed to and loves, even in an irrational way, loves his own children, is committed to them, loyal to them. Is not bothered by being asked for things from the child. Jesus illustrated this later in the Sermon on the Mount, in chapter 7, when he said in verse 9, Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, who is in heaven, give good things to those who ask him? So that, one of the things about a father that Jesus wants us to transfer in our thinking to God, is that he is one who is glad to give good things to his children.

And that is what a father is, in real life. So we are to regard God not as, we're to approach God with the acknowledgement and assumption that he is toward us like a father toward children. And will receive our prayers as a father receives requests from his own sons.

Verse 10 says, Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Now these are parallel statements that are almost identical in meaning. The coming of the kingdom is a progressive phenomenon.

Jesus established the kingdom of God when he was here. In one sense, the kingdom of God had come. He said the kingdom of God is among you.

He said the kingdom of God has overtaken you. The kingdom of God was at hand prior to that, and then it actually arrived. But he said the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that starts out very small and grows into a great tree.

That takes a while, that's progressive. He also said the kingdom of God is like a little bit of leaven that is put into three measures of meal. And it affects the whole lump.

That too is a process. It's not instantaneous. So that from the time of Christ onward, the kingdom has come and has been coming.

It has been introduced into the lump of dough, but it is still expanding. It has been planted like a mustard, but it's still growing. And of course, the prophets and the New Testament scriptures also anticipate a time when there will be no further room for growth.

Because like the little stone in Daniel chapter 2, the kingdom of God will have grown to be a great mountain that fills the whole earth and displaces all other kingdoms. That vision of Daniel is in all the prophets and is in the New Testament. And so when we pray, your kingdom come, we're simply praying that the kingdom will continue to progress, continue to come, continue to expand, continue to prosper.

The kingdom, therefore, spreads not only by the preaching of the gospel, as Jesus pointed out that does in the parable of the sower. The seed is the word of God, and the kingdom is spread by the sowing of that seed. But not only by the preaching of the gospel, but by prayer.

It is a constant daily, no doubt, prayer of someone somewhere in the world. There are Christians at this very moment praying this very prayer somewhere. That God's kingdom will come.

More than it already has. Continue to grow, continue to flourish, continue to make new conquests. And the result of that, when the kingdom has fully come, will be that God's will will have been done and will be being done on earth in the same way that it is in heaven.

To the same extent. Now God's will is done 100% in heaven. There's nothing going on there that's against his will.

Therefore, this prayer is essentially praying that everything on earth will be as conformed to the will of God as is the case in heaven. That it will be like heaven on earth. There are certain things already true in heaven.

Our prayers are desiring to bring them to pass on earth. In a sense, our prayers are part of our warfare. And they are part of our enforcing on earth the realities of heaven.

Jesus is reigning in heaven. Our prayers enforce his reign on earth. And promote his reign on earth.

Jesus has bound the enemy in heaven. Our prayers bind him on earth. Jesus said,

whatsoever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven.

There are things already true in heaven that are not yet realized here. And it is the prayers and the activities of the church that are to bring about on earth the things that are already true in heaven. Now when I pray thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

There's a sense in which the coming of the kingdom and the will of God be done on earth as it is in heaven is a future hope. I anticipate. But at the same time, I expect my prayer that I pray today to propel this effort another step closer to its fulfillment.

And that when I pray it, the result of my prayer will be that God's kingdom will have come to some new point as a result of my praying. And his will will be done today on earth as it is in heaven more than before I prayed. That's the purpose of prayer.

Prayer isn't just a therapeutic to make you feel better about living in a world that can't be changed for the better. A lot of people think prayer is that way. I've heard actually Christians say prayer doesn't really change the circumstances, it just changes you.

And that's good. You know, you're all worried and fretting and you're in trials and so forth and you spend time in prayer. You feel much better afterwards and that's what prayer is for.

You know, you surrender to God and you come away feeling better about everything. No, that's not all that prayer is for. Prayer is to get stuff done.

Jesus said, if you pray in my name I will do it. James said you have not because you ask not. There are things that will happen if you pray that will not happen if you don't pray.

Prayer is not just a spiritual therapeutic to make you feel better after you've prayed. Prayer is to change the world. When Jesus prays that my kingdom will come, pray that my will will be done on earth as it is in heaven, he intends for us to understand that by praying this will be advancing that reality.

And notice that it is the first concern in prayer. When Jesus says, when you pray, don't pray bless Aunt Martha and bless Grandma and bless me and give me a better job and give me a more comfortable house. I mean, those are not the things that ought to be prayed for.

Not first anyway, not first priority. First priority is God's interest, not mine. Prayer is not there as Aladdin's lamp to give me three wishes, whatever selfish thing I want.

Prayer is my way of working with God, releasing God, inviting God to intervene in this world that he's turned over to us to run, and saying, God, you come in here and do this for your sake. You bring about your will. You bring about your kingdom.

That is the first concern of prayer because that's what prayer is primarily for, is bringing in the will of God by inviting him to work in ways that he would stand back and do nothing if we did not invite him into the world that he's given us. Remember, he gave dominion over the world to man, and therefore he awaits man's request to do many things that he would otherwise like to do. Now, another request in his prayers, give us this day our daily bread.

Now, that's personal. That's asking for what I need. But at the same time, notice it is not really a selfish prayer at all.

I am his servant. I am his child. I am coming to him as a participant in his enterprise, as one that he has an interest in sustaining, because I'm one of the workers on his crew or whatever.

There is a job that God is doing, and I have volunteered to be a part of the crew, part of the team, but I've got to eat. I can't work on this task if I am starving, and so I ask him for my daily bread. Notice, daily bread is how much I need today.

This is a modest request. This is not asking for abundance. This is asking for enough to survive.

This is asking for what is needed to keep me moving. And since all of my motion is in his service, it is in his interest to supply my bread. Now, I'm not saying he wouldn't supply it just out of sympathy with me, but my concern as a person praying is not to turn prayer into a magic wand for all my selfish desires, but to use prayer for its proper purpose, to focus it upon getting the will of God done and promoting the kingdom of God.

By the way, God, I need some food for that. By the way, God, I need to pay my bills. By the way, I need gas in my car.

Nothing wrong with asking for that. That's not selfish. If everything I am doing is in the service of God one way or another, and that's true of every Christian, if they're right-minded, it doesn't mean they're in full-time preaching.

But when you go to your job, when you keep the house, when you do whatever it is God has you do, you're doing it because that's what he has you doing. You're doing it for him. You're promoting his purposes by you being there.

And therefore, it is in his interest to sustain his own servants and to give them their daily bread and whatever else is needed. The daily bread, of course, just represents my daily provisions, whatever my needs are. Nothing wrong with praying for your needs.

I've heard people say, oh, I'd never ask... I remember someone telling me that their car was all broken down and they're having continual problems with it. It's old and rusted out and they really need a better car. I've asked them, have you asked the Lord to get

you another car? They say, oh, I would never ask God for anything for myself.

That would be selfish. I mean, this is sort of the opposite of what most people do. Most people pray only selfishly.

This is a person who thought it was wrong to pray for anything for himself. I thought, well, do you ever intend to get another car? Oh, yeah, I'm saving up my money. I said, wait a minute.

You wouldn't pray for a car, but you'd work for one? Prayer and work are supposed to be two parts of the same project. There are things God wants for you and there's things God doesn't want for you. If God wants something for you, why shouldn't you pray for it? You work for it because you believe He wants you to have it.

Why not pray for it? On the other hand, if a car isn't something God wants for you, you shouldn't be working for it either. If you can't pray for it, you shouldn't work for it either. Work is the way that we do what we can to fulfill the will of God.

Prayer is how we engage His power to do what we cannot do. But both His power and ours are engaged in the same direction, on the things that are the will of God. If God wants you to have a car, don't be ashamed to ask Him for one.

Nothing selfish about that if He wants you to have it. If He doesn't want you to have it, you shouldn't be saving up for one. If it's something He doesn't want you to have, you should not in any way be pursuing it.

Well, anything that you feel that God would have you pursue, you must pursue not only with your actions but with your prayers. Get God involved on the project. It's not wrong to ask for the needed things.

The next part of the prayer is, Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Of course, we've already talked about that a fair bit when we're talking about the blessed and the merciful. They shall obtain mercy.

Let me just say that I believe that Jesus is indicating one thing here, is that we do need to be forgiven regularly. Jesus does not depict Christians who get one breakthrough and sin is no longer in their life. But when they pray, whenever they pray, they may need to ask again for forgiveness.

Because prayer is our way of communicating what we need to communicate with God. And if we have offended God, we need to ask forgiveness. I've heard people say that you should never ask forgiveness twice after you've gotten saved.

After you've gotten saved, God's covered all your sins, you should never ask for forgiveness again. But I don't believe that that's agreeable with anything in the Bible. I

certainly do not agree with this fact that he says, When you pray, pray in this manner.

Forgive us debts. Sin is a debt that's owed to God. That is to say, we don't owe it to Him to sin, but we owe it to Him to obey.

So when we disobey, we have an unpaid debt, a violation. And we cannot pay it back. We can't go back and un-sin.

Therefore, we can ask for forgiveness of sin. But if we are asking God to cancel our debt to Him, then we have to be prepared to cancel debts that others owe us, whether it's sin or other debts they cannot pay. And the final petition is actually, Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Do not lead us into temptation has confused a lot of people because it sounds like if we don't pray this, God will maybe lead us into temptation. We have to ask Him not to do that. And God doesn't tempt people, James says.

God cannot be tempted with evil. Neither does He tempt any man. So why should I ever have to ask God not to lead me into temptation? Let me start trying to answer that by saying this.

Notice that the verse 13 presumes that we are being led by God. There is a sense, it's already a given, I am following God. I'm following His lead.

Where He leads, I will go. Now, I have some preferences as to where He would lead me. But of course, I have to let Him lead me wherever He wants me to go.

And temptation is part of our testing, part of our life. When I say, Lead us not into temptation, I'm not saying, God, don't let me ever, ever experience temptation. That would simply not be praying according to the will of God.

He wants me to experience temptation. Jesus experienced temptation. It's part of our training.

It's part of our warfare. We would have to leave the world to experience no temptation. And we're not praying to leave the world.

You have to understand this first part of the petition in connection with the second, which is parallel to it. But deliver us from the evil one. I believe that Lead us not into temptation is an unfinished thought, which is finished with, and paralleled to, by deliver us from the evil one.

That is to say, as you lead me, God, I know I will be led through temptation. There will be times this path goes through a place of temptation. But I don't want to be led in there without being delivered from it.

Don't just lead me into temptation, but additionally, deliver me out of it. Deliver me from the clutches of the tempted. If you must lead me through temptation, let it be through and not just into.

I'm asking you to take me safely through temptation and deliver me out of it. Not deliver me from it in the sense that I don't ever experience it. But, as Jesus put it in his prayer for us, on the same subject, in John 17, 15, he said, Father, I do not pray that you take them out of the world, but that you would keep them safe from the wicked one.

Same thing, same concern. It's not that I want to be out of the sphere of temptation. I just want to be kept safe and sanctified within it.

This final close of the prayer, Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, is not found in some manuscripts. However, those very words are found in the closing of one of David's prayers. In 1 Chronicles 29, 11, David prayed, thanking God for the gifts that were given for the building of the temple, and he closed his prayer with words very much like, almost exactly, Yours is the kingdom, yours is the power, yours is the glory.

We don't know whether Jesus actually attached this to the prayer. It is not found in Luke's parallel, and it's not found in some manuscripts of Matthew's version. But there's certainly nothing bad about it.

There's nothing wrong with it. As I say, there's another biblical prayer that actually ends with these words. And I've never had any problem including these words whenever I've said the so-called Lord's Prayer.

So Jesus actually has taught us more about prayer here than he has about alms or about fasting. In addition to the non-ostentatiousness of our prayers, they should not be wrongheaded like the heathen who think that, you know, chattering and begging and repetition and chanting and so forth, that this is somehow going to appease a God that doesn't really care and isn't really there and won't do it unless you jump through the right hoops and say enough of the right formulas. No, you can speak quite simply and plainly to God.

Keep your prayers on the right subject with the right concerns. Keep the right focus that you're praying for God's interest more than anyone else's. Your sanctity and your provisions and your forgiveness are all part of God's interest for you and you can pray for those but pray essentially for that his kingdom and his will will come.

And that's what prayer is for. Notice the prayer he gives is rather short. It's succinct.

It says it all. Now, there are ways you can beef that up. You can fill it out.

I mean, the part, your will be done on earth, you can pray for specific things that you know are his will. If you say, forgive us our debts, you can name specific sins. If you say,

give us our daily bread, you can mention specific needs.

You can add, this is a skeletal prayer that basically tells the priorities and the contents of good praying. It can be this short, but it can be longer too. I mean, there are longer prayers than this in the Bible.

But these are the concerns that your prayer should have. And notice that Jesus indicates it doesn't have to be a very long time spent praying so long as it's a real prayer to a real relationship with God. Let's look at fasting real briefly here.

There's not so much to say in the New Testament about fasting or the Old. Jesus says, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites with the sad countenance. They just figure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting.

Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that you do not appear to men to be fasting. But to your father who is in the secret place, and your father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

I would say, first of all, there is no command in Scripture for Christians ever to fast. And therefore, if a Christian never fasts, they are not in violation of an actual command. But, notice also, Jesus said, when you fast.

And this was in a section where he said, when you give alms, when you pray. Obviously, although he didn't say, you shall give alms or you shall pray, the assumption is you will. Religious and pious and godly people will do these things.

And when they do, they must do it the right way. Jesus doesn't say, thou shalt fast, but he assumes that his disciples will fast. On another occasion, in Matthew 9, Jesus was challenged about this because his disciples didn't fast.

And John the Baptist's disciples and the Pharisees did fast twice a week. And they asked why Jesus' disciples didn't. He said, well, listen, they don't fast when the bridegroom is with them, but when the bridegroom is taken away, then they will fast.

Once again, he did not say, thou shalt fast, but he predicted that they would. Jesus had the assumption that his disciples would fast. And I would say that if you're a legalist, you might say, well, I don't have to fast because Jesus never commanded it.

But if your concern is fulfilling God's expectations for you and his desire for you, there certainly is a clear indication that his expectation for his people is that they will fast at times. But like praying and like giving, there's no set amount. To make it two days a week could end up being a ritual that has no power in it at all.

I believe that fasting, at least in the Old Testament, when it was done spontaneously, it was done because of a crisis, because of a need to focus prayers on a particular need,

and so forth. Now, some people fast routinely in order to discipline the body. This may have some benefit.

It's good health. It's healthy to fast. There are health benefits, and there are probably some benefits in personal discipline.

But I don't believe that any of those are the principal reason for fasting in the Bible. In the Bible, fasting is attached to prayer almost always. And I believe that what fasting is, is giving up food.

You can give up a meal, two meals, three meals, three days' meals, ten days' meals, forty days' meals. Any time you skip a meal deliberately to spend time in prayer or to add intensity to your prayer focus, you are fasting. It can be a day.

It can be less than a day. It can be more than a day. But fasting is when you basically say, this issue for which I'm praying is more important to me than my daily bread.

It's more important to me than my food. As Job said, I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food. And basically, by skipping a meal to devote yourself to prayer for a certain thing, you are communicating to your own heart as well as to God, this thing means something to me.

I'm not just shooting up a casual and shallow prayer. I am devoted to seeing this accomplished, this thing for which I pray. I'm committed to it.

And I'm giving it as a token of my commitment. I'm giving up meals for this. And this is what I believe fasting is about.

There is no actual teaching about fasting in the Scripture that goes beyond this. There's many Christian testimonies about fasting, and good things have been described as coming from fasting. But the idea of fasting is essentially, it is usually linked with prayer in Scripture as an intensifier of your focus on something you're praying for.

And I don't know of any other significance the Bible gives it. There may be other benefits, but I don't know of the Bible giving it further benefits. But when you do it, it's something to be done like prayer and like giving, without seeking to impress people, but only because of your sincere desire to draw near to God and to please Him.

Well, we've run out of time for this session, and I would have said more about fasting, but I'm not sure that it's necessary to. We will go on to the next session in the next session.