

Sermon Transcript
November 4, 2012



Kingdom Life is a Religious Life
Alms, Prayer and Fasting
Matthew 6:1-18

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on November 4, 2012, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Pastor Scott Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286.

Scripture Text
Matthew 6:1-18

¹ “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

² “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,

¹² and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, ¹⁵ neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

¹⁶ “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Introduction

I am really glad we are spending time walking through the Sermon on the Mount. These words of Jesus are very practical. They touch where we live every single day. These words of Jesus go deep, don't they? They tell us how we are to live as followers of Jesus. With this sermon, Jesus is just doing what rabbis do. He is showing us, his disciples, what life looks like when God is in our lives. Through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is showing us what life in the kingdom of God looks like.

I hope it has been clearly evident from this sermon that when God is in your life, there is not a corner of your life that is not impacted by God. When God is in your life, he shows up in your marriage and in your home. When God is in your life, he shows up in every relationship imaginable, good and bad. When God is in your life, he is present in every word you speak. When God is in your life, he changes your heart. God changes who you are on the inside. The kingdom of God goes with you wherever you go. The kingdom of God greets whoever you greet. When the kingdom of God is alive in you, it spills out into every relationship you have, because it is something that has come alive inside of you. It can't help but spill out of your life wherever you go.

It is what the prophets spoke about when they spoke of the coming Messiah and the new era he would usher in through the Holy Spirit. Ezekiel said it this way in Ezekiel 36:26-27, *"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."* This is exactly what Jesus has brought to us when he proclaimed his message, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* It has come!

Because the kingdom of God is an inner reality that transforms who we are on the inside, I have been praying Matthew 5 over myself, over my family and over the WEFC family. All week I have been using Matthew 5 as the outline for my prayers, asking God to cause his kingdom life to take residence inside of us. With this in mind, I would like to lead us in prayer.

"Heavenly Father, all praise and honor belongs to you. Through Jesus, the Son of God, your kingdom has come. We confess Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Savior. Not only has Jesus come to cleanse us from our sin through faith in his work on the cross, but he has come to reconcile this fallen world to you. May your kingdom come! May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Thank you for the Holy Spirit who is advancing your kingdom around this globe, one heart at a time. And so we pray Holy Spirit, by your power, form your kingdom values to our hearts. Change us! Transform us!

We ask that we would be poor in spirit, humbly acknowledging that we have nothing in ourselves to earn any favor before God. We are completely dependent upon your grace and your mercy. Cause us to mourn over our sin and to hate anything in us that opposes your perfect will. May we be meek and humble towards you and our fellow man. Give us a passion, a hunger and thirst for what is good and right and true. May we be merciful to others as you have been merciful to us. May our religion be of the heart and not simply for show. May we do what we can do to promote peace in all our relationships and may we be willing to identify ourselves with Jesus, in a world that is often hostile to Christ. In forming these things in us, I pray that we would be salt and light to a world in need. I pray that the love of God would be so evident in us and through us that others would know that *“Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they may have life in his name.”*

Thank you for Jesus, who has come to fulfill the Law. He has shown us the way to live. Help us to walk in that way. Thank you that righteousness is passed onto us through faith in Jesus Christ. We believe in Jesus Christ the only begotten Son our Lord, who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried, descended into Hades, risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, sitting at the right hand of God the Father, Almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. All hail King Jesus!

Help us to live self-controlled lives. May we not hold onto anger and bitterness towards anyone, and in doing so, may we not give the enemy an opportunity in our lives to discredit Jesus. Protect our eyes and our hearts from sexual sin. Temptation is all around us and it is so easy to stumble in this area. Protect our men. Protect our boys. In doing so, may we protect the women in our lives whom you have given to us as the mirror image of ourselves. I pray for the marriages and the families of our church. I pray that they would be the first expression of Christ and the church in our lives. I pray for faithfulness and for the passing of faith from one generation to the next. I pray that the kingdom of God would be alive in our homes. May there be no discrepancy between the words we speak and the lives we live. Help us to be true to our words and our promises and may our words encourage one another. Give us servant hearts, hearts of compassion, that cause us to go the extra mile for our family, our neighbors and our brothers and sisters in Christ. Give us strength that when we are wronged, we do not seek to retaliate, instead we respond with love for even our enemies. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever! Amen!”

That is Matthew 5 put to prayer. We could stop right there and find plenty to process and pray about in our lives. But Jesus moves on. And so do we. What we share today is designed to help us live out what we just prayed for.

The Role of Ritual

As we move to Matthew 6, Jesus makes a shift from the internal to the external. He says in Matthew 6:1, *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.”* Literally, Jesus is talking about “acts of righteousness” which are none other than “rituals of religion.” In our tradition, we tend to call them “disciplines of the faith.”

Jesus is not “anti-ritual.” In our passage this morning, Jesus identifies three “rituals of religion.” In verse 2 he talks about the ritual of the giving of alms to the poor. In verse 5, he talks about the ritual of prayer. And then in verse 16, he talks about the ritual of fasting. Notice the word you find in front of each of these rituals. The word is “*when*.” We read, *“when you give to the needy . . . when you pray . . . when you fast.”* The presence of the word “*when*” indicates that there is a measure of expectation regarding these rituals. As far as Jesus is concerned, it is a given that we will practice certain “rituals” of the faith. Jesus is not “anti-ritual.”

We have religious rituals we practice here. Just by showing up this morning for this “worship service” you are participating in a religious ritual. You are worshiping in song, participating in prayer, listening to the preaching of the Word, and in a moment you will be partaking in a ritual we call “the Lord’s Supper.” These are rituals prescribed for us. In his instructions to Timothy, who is a young pastor, Paul says to him in 1 Timothy 2:1, *“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people.”* They were to regularly engage in the ritual of prayer. In 1 Timothy 4:13 Paul adds, *“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”* They were to observe the ritual of the reading and preaching of the Word of God. Jesus himself is the one who instituted the Lord’s Table and called us to *“eat this bread and drink this cup . . . until he comes.”* And so this morning we observe this religious ritual.

We just rehearsed our church covenant and in our covenant we pledged to observe a variety of rituals. We committed ourselves to the practice of private prayer and the reading of Scripture. We committed ourselves to worshiping God as a family in our homes. We committed ourselves to the ritual of gathering together on a Sunday for public worship and to observing the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. Kingdom life is a religious life. We are called to practice the rituals of religion.

The role of religious ritual is not to perform ritual for the sake of ritual. You are going to hear me encourage you to evaluate how you go about observing religious ritual in your life. I am going to encourage you this morning to practice religious rituals. I hope

to give you practical help in doing so. But from the very beginning, I want to make sure you hear what I am saying to you. The purpose for practicing religious ritual is because these are the external things God uses to form the inner kingdom life we just prayed through and looked at in Matthew 5. If the external practice of religious ritual is not feeding the internal heart, then you are missing the point of the ritual.

Why does one go through the ritual of reading God's Word on a daily basis? I hide God's Word in my heart so that I will not sin against God. Do you see it? The goal of the external ritual, reading God's Word, is to impact the internal heart and to help me overcome sin in my life. Proverbs 29:18 is a verse I think often gets misquoted and therefore misses the point. Have you ever heard the verse, "*Where there is no vision, the people perish.*" This verse is often used to encourage an organization or even a church to have a "vision" for where they are going. I don't think that is a bad idea and we have a vision statement. But that is not the point of this verse. A better translation of this verse is, "*Where there is no prophetic revelation the people cast off restraint.*" In other words, when the Word of God is absent, everyone does what is right in their own eyes. So can you see why the ritual of reading God's Word is more than just a ritual you perform out of duty? It is your lifeline. The daily reading of God's Word is what shapes your inner kingdom life. Are you observing this ritual?

A ritual that has been sadly lost to us in our tradition is the ritual of catechism. Catechism is a series of questions and answers that help provide a framework for understanding God and how God impacts all of life. I am excited about a brand new catechism called New City Catechism, developed by Tim Keller and the people of Redeemer Presbyterian Church. They have 52 questions, one for each week of the year. I am pondering how to incorporate this into our church life starting January 2013 and how to make it available to families to use during the course of the week. If you are looking for a tool to help you with family worship, this would be excellent. For example the first question reads like this:

Q: What is our only hope in life and in death?

A: That we are not our own but belong, body and soul, both in life and in death, to God and to our Savior Jesus Christ.

There is even a shortened answer each week for children who are younger. Here is the shortened version of the question for week one.

Q: What is our only hope in life and in death?

A: That we are not our own but belong to God.

Now I want you to hear how this ritual of catechism impacted the inner life of one child. A mother wrote about a time she was picking up her child from the babysitter and he

was staring rather pensively out the window. So the mother asked, “What are you thinking about?” Her son responded by saying, “God.” “What are you thinking about God” she responded in surprise, and got the even more surprising answer: “How he made all things for his own glory.” She almost fell over—she thought she was in the presence of a prodigy. Really, it was just the catechism.”¹ Really, it was just a ritual taking root in a young person’s life. Jesus is not against ritual. Ritual is used to form the inner life of the kingdom of God.

The Motive of Ritual

There is a danger when it comes to observing rituals. That is what Jesus is warning against in Matthew 6. The danger is found in observing the ritual with the wrong motive. We have all been there. And, quite honestly, sometimes we just don’t want to do the “ritual.” Sometimes I don’t really want to pray. Sometimes I find the reading of my Bible to be laborious and dry. So should I only observe the ritual when I truly desire to do so? Should I only read my Bible or pray or come to church on Sunday when my motive is completely pure? Sometimes you need to just persevere in observing the ritual because these are the very things God uses to feed your soul. Don’t you find that when you persevere, you are often glad you did it in the end? Jesus is not speaking against this struggle we all have when it comes to “training ourselves to be godly.”

So what is the motive Jesus is speaking against here? Listen to how Jesus puts it. In Matthew 6:2, Jesus says, *“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.”* In verse 5 he says, *“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.”* In verse 16 he adds, *“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.”* Did you catch the common thread running through the words of Jesus? They give to the needy to “toot their own horns.” They pray in public, repeating the same words over and over again and somehow thinking that this makes them look more spiritual than others and therefore they pray to be noticed. When they fast they make it look obvious so that others can see how “religious” and how “righteous” they must be. They do what they do for show. They perform their religious rituals, thinking that because of how religious they are that somehow God must favor them more or somehow they have ingratiated themselves before God. This is the danger Jesus warns us against. Don’t think that the practice of ritual earns you favor with God.

May I suggest two ways we fall into the trap of what Jesus condemns in Matthew 6? These two thoughts represent opposite ends of the spectrum.

Let me begin by asking you a question. Does your public practice of ritual match your private practice of ritual? Don't misunderstand what Jesus is saying here. He is not saying that is wrong to pray in public. He is not saying that we should ban the public practice of our rituals. But where the hypocrisy comes into play is when the ritual is only observed when others are watching. So do you give to people in need when no one is watching? It doesn't mean you can't put money in the offering plate when people next to you see what you are doing. But is giving of your resources to others a way of life? What about prayer? Do you pray in private? Or do you only bow your head when others are looking? If the last time you opened your Bible was when you sat where you are sitting now, perhaps your ritual has not yet become a way of life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is presenting a way of life. Therefore, these rituals are not to be compartmentalized into our Sunday mornings and not find their way into the rhythm of our daily lives. Does your public practice of ritual match your private practice of ritual?

Now here is the other danger on the other side of the spectrum. We can very quickly practice our rituals rather routinely. We can read our Bible every day. We can say our prayers every day. We can serve down at the church in a variety of ways. And the next thing we know, we start feeling pretty good about ourselves and the thought enters our minds, "Boy, I am a really good Christian." And then we think, "if I do this, then God must bless me." You hear this joked about on the golf course from time to time. You hit a good shot (which is rare for me) or get a nice bounce off of the tree, off of the rock and onto the fairway, and someone says, "You must be living right!" Or, "You must have had a good devotional this morning." Obviously, it is a joke. But underlying this joke is a mentality of self-righteousness that lives in our hearts and that feels that if I do my job, God is obligated to do certain things for me. We forget what it means to be poor in spirit. We forget that I can't do anything to obligate God to do something for me or to put God in a place where he owes me. Don't turn your rituals into a list that you do to make you feel acceptable to God and loved by God.

It is very hard to evaluate our motives. I sometimes wonder if I have ever had a completely pure motive. And yet there is a motive that God desires of us when we practice our rituals. The motive is love. These disciplines of the faith are not always easy to keep. These kinds of sermons often leave us wallowing in guilt and feeling as though we often fail. But here is the remedy for that. The motive for reading my Bible, for spending time in prayer, for coming to church, for coming to the Lord's Table, for giving to the poor . . . is simply love. And it starts with God's love for us. I have found that the more I spend time contemplating God's love and grace in my life, the more I long for these rituals to be a way of life in my home. How well you perform your religious rituals this week does not determine how much God loves you. But the more you contemplate God's love for you, the more you are drawn to these rituals

because they are means of expressing your love for God in return. So don't see these rituals as a list that needs done. Rather, see these rituals as means by which God expresses his unconditional love to you and as a means by which you can love him back. The motive God is after is love. The goal God is after is relationship. So embrace these rituals. Learn how to live them out. Persevere in them. When knocked down, get back up and you will find a loving God standing there ready to meet with you. He will say to you, "It is so good to have you back. I really missed our times together."

The Practice of Ritual

In our passage this morning, Jesus identifies three rituals. This is by no means an exhaustive list of religious rituals. But I would like to make a few comments about the observance of these three rituals. Then I want to close to prepare us to observe the ritual of the Lord's Supper.

The Giving of Alms: The first ritual Jesus mentions is the giving of alms to the poor. Does that strike you as odd? If you were to come up with a list of spiritual disciplines or a list of religious rituals, would this even find its way onto the list. And yet for the Jews, this was considered a pillar of religious life. This is what religious people do, they give to the poor. They actually had a name for it. It was called "to do mercy."²

Really, "doing mercy" is the aim of good religion. In Isaiah 58, God says to the people of Israel if their fasting and their religious life failed to lead them to care for the poor that their religion was worthless. He says in verses 6-7, "*Is not this the fast I choose. . . Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh.*" When you read this Old Testament passage, you can see why the giving of alms is at the top of the list of religious rituals. And yet, even something as good as this can be done with the wrong motives. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:3, "*If I give away all I have . . . but have not love, I gain nothing.*"

So how do I practice this ritual as a way of life? Can I encourage you to just elevate this ritual in your mind to the place Jesus elevates it. It is at the top of the list. Here is what I have observed. The more you give of yourself to the one in need, the more your heart is developed with love for people and the more prone you will be to give even more. This is a ritual that has long been part of the Christian tradition and I am glad the evangelical community is reclaiming it. I like seeing it as a ritual of faith. Sometimes the church takes a "bum wrap" in our culture. We have our own warts, no doubt. I like, though, what Kevin DeYoung says. "Christians need to stop perpetuating the myth that we've been huge failures in the world. That may win us an audience with non-

Christians, but it is not true. . . . Christians give more to charitable causes than their secular counterparts. Christians run countless shelters, pregnancy centers, rescue missions, and food pantries. Christians operate orphanages, staff clinics, dig wells, raise crops, teach children, fight AIDS around the globe. . . . There is not a group of people on the planet that do more for the poor than Christians.”³ Why? Because the inner life of the kingdom of God is formed to our hearts, often through the rituals we observe, and the outgrowth of that is love for the one in need. Lets excel at this ritual all the more.

Prayer: The next ritual Jesus addresses is the ritual of prayer. Here is where the guilt starts to build within us. Many of us don’t pray as we should. I find it interesting that this is the ritual Jesus talks about the most. In fact, he makes two points about prayer. He tells us how to pray and what to pray.

How should we pray? In verse 6 Jesus says, “*But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.*” Do you have a ritual of praying in private? In other words, is prayer a way of life for you? I think Jesus understands our struggle here. We want to be people of prayer, but we struggle with it. In Luke 11, the disciples come to Jesus and ask Jesus to teach them to pray. They watched Jesus go off to pray and they admired that in Jesus and longed to do that same. But they knew that they didn’t pray as they should. So it is with us. We have no problem understanding what Jesus is saying to us when he calls us to practice the ritual of prayer in our private lives. We get that. And yet, no discipline seems to be so hard to master than the discipline of prayer. So guess what Jesus does? He gives us a prayer to pray! He gives us the Lord’s Prayer.

I don’t know where you are with the ritual of prayer. Your prayer life may be non-existent. If that is where you are, just acknowledge that to be so. Or maybe you are limping by and want to grow in this area but you don’t know how to develop a prayer life. I would like to offer you three suggestions to help you. They are very simple and just require a little bit of effort.

1. If you don’t know where to start, start here. Just start by reciting the Lord’s Prayer. There is nothing wrong with that. At least you will know that you are praying according to the will of God. I know a couple who recited this prayer every night before they went to sleep.
2. Take the prayer guide in the literature racks and use them during the week. They are built around the Lord’s Prayer. You can also get the sermons from the time we studied the Lord’s Prayer and you can learn how to construct your prayers around this prayer. The goal of prayer is not to change God but to change us. If you want Matthew 5 to be reflected in your heart, you need to learn to pray this prayer. Pray the prayer at the beginning of this sermon.

3. Finally, get around people who know how to pray. Every second Saturday of the month, from 8:00 - 10:00 in the morning, we gather for prayer. Just come and listen. I have seen people come into that group who have never prayed out loud before, become effective prayers.

There is no other way around it. Prayer is one of our rituals of faith. Lets Pray!

Fasting: Finally, the last ritual Jesus mentions is fasting. This is a ritual that has been lost among the evangelical community. But don't forget what word you find at the beginning of this ritual. It is the word "*when*." The issue was not "if" perchance we find ourselves fasting from time to time. But "*when*" we fast we are not to draw attention to ourselves, but we are to do so as a ritual that shapes our inner life.

Fasting is abstaining from food or from something else for a period of time and it is often coupled with an intense time of prayer. Often when we are seeking direction from God, we fast and we pray. That is what the church did in Acts 13:3 and Acts 14:23. Here is the benefit of fasting. Here is how it helps form the inner life of the kingdom we read about in Matthew 5. As we deny ourselves food for a period of time, we learn how to live in dependence upon God and how to develop a lifestyle of self-discipline and denial. By learning how to say "no" to our natural hunger pains, we learn how to say "no" to the desire to be angry or how to say "no" to sexual temptation. It teaches us how to rely on God and practice self-discipline. So try it. You can fast for a meal, for a day and for longer. When the hunger pains strike, you are reminded to pray. Did you ever go through a day and realize that you didn't engage with God at all? Fasting cures that. With each pang of hunger, you are reminded to pray.

Conclusion

Kingdom Life is a Religious Life! Jesus is not against ritual. Rather, ritual has been given to us to help form the inner life of God's kingdom in us. So embrace ritual. Make ritual a part of your every day life. Don't see ritual as a list of things you need to do. Rather, see ritual as an opportunity to rehearse God's love for you through Jesus and therefore as an opportunity for you to express that love back to God and to others.

With this in mind we ready ourselves to observe the ritual of the Lord's Table. Don't just go through the motions this morning. Jesus has given us the wonderful gift of this table. He stands here ready to minister his grace to you. He reminds you that as sure as you hold the bread and the cup in your hand this morning and lift it to your mouth, you can be sure that in his body and in his blood he has atoned for your sin and has made a way for you to enter into the love that exists between the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

He invites you to come and find rest for your soul. He invites you to confess your sin, turn to Jesus for forgiveness and resolve to live for him.

Let us come by reciting together the Lord's Prayer

Our Father, which art in heaven
Hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy 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
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever, Amen.

¹Kathy Keller "Catechism— With OUR Kids?" www.thegospelcoalition.org October, 22, 2012

²Michael J. Wilkins *Matthew: NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 272

³Kevin DeYoung "Does Jesus Hate Religion? Kinda, Sorta, Not Really" www.thegospelcoalition.org January 13, 2012