
ABINGDON NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

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and actions that lead one in the direction of God's future reign and, at the same time, are symptomatic of its presence even now breaking into history.

Authentic Piety and Right Action (6:1-7:12)

The main body of the Sermon continues to define Jesus' teaching on "greater righteousness," but with increasing emphasis on the interior attitudes and dispositions that are to inform authentic action.

A first section (6:1-18) takes up three classical expressions of Jewish piety: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. In each instance, Jesus' words probe the spirit and intent that must inform authentic piety. The Lord's Prayer, framed by further sayings on prayer and forgiveness, stands at the heart of this segment and reinforces its message (6:7-15). The organization of the remaining material (6:19-7:12) is less clearly defined. In the proverbial style of Wisdom literature, the Sermon strings together a number of Jesus' sayings on concern for possessions (6:19-34), on judging others (7:1-5), on reverence for what is holy (7:6), and on confident prayer (7:7-11). The body of the Sermon closes with the "Golden Rule" (7:12), which reprises the fundamental theme of 5:17-48.

The first section on authentic piety (6:1-18) is unique to Matthew, except for the Lord's Prayer, which parallels Luke's briefer version of the Prayer (Luke 11:1-4). Some have suggested that for this section Matthew may have had access to a preexisting literary piece. However, it is just as likely that Matthew himself is responsible for the present format, drawing on traditions and teachings within his own Jewish-Christian community. The material is steeped in Jewish practice and the sayings have the tang of Jesus' own teaching style. In the final segment (6:19-7:12) Matthew draws mainly on Q, with virtually all of the material finding parallels in Luke.

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6:1-18: The opening verse sets the tone and content for the entire section. Jesus warns the disciples not to perform acts of piety before others in order to be seen. The word translated here as "piety" is

actually "righteousness" (*dikaiosyne*), the key motif that runs like a powerful current through the entire Sermon (see 5:20; also 3:15; 5:6, 10). Here "righteousness" is defined as acts of piety, revered by Judaism and surely also by Matthew's own community. Matthew's concern is that such action be truly an expression of one's interior communion with God. Another key term in this verse is "your Father in heaven," which will be cited throughout the following passage (see 6:4, 6, 8, 9, 14, 15, 18). Typical of Matthew, this designation affirms both God's loving presence ("Father") and awesome transcendence ("in heaven") and will find full expression in the Lord's Prayer (6:9-13).

The fundamental principle expressed in verse 1 sets up the contrasts that run through Jesus' teaching on all three categories of piety: a contrast between actions that are done in public and those that are hidden; a contrast between actions done to be seen by people and those done to be seen by God; a contrast between an immediate reward and a future reward. What is at stake here is not really the question of favoring "private" over "public" forms of piety but the guiding intention and spirit of all religious acts.

Thus almsgiving (6:2-4) was not to be done in order to "be praised by others." The biting edge of Matthew's critique of the religious leaders begins to emerge by identifying as negative examples the "hypocrites . . . in the synagogues and in the streets." "Hypocrites" (a Greek term meaning an "actor" but in this context obviously implying a false facade of behavior) is a label Jesus will apply to the scribes and Pharisees (see 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29). Rather than sounding a trumpet to draw attention and reap praise, the disciple should give alms "in secret" so that only God will know and give the true reward. The notion that God would reward the just in the end time was a staple of Jewish eschatology and is a theme of several Matthean parables (see, e.g., 25:14-30, 31-46).

Nor is prayer (6:5-6) to be done for public display but in secret, in an inner room of the house where only God can see one pray. This intriguing emphasis on prayer in secret with God will find an echo later in the Gospel when Jesus himself goes to pray alone (14:23). The "reward" for such prayer is not human admiration but the response that God alone can give (7:11).

Likewise, one's fasting (6:16-17) is not to be broadcast by external signs and looking gloomy. (Perhaps by heaping ashes on one's head? The word "disfigure" used by Matthew here is undefined.) Instead disciples who fast should put oil on their heads and wash their faces (i.e., no ashes or distinguishing signs of a fast)—in other words look normal or even festive. The text does not speak of the motivation for fasting (as 9:14-15) but assumes it is a worthwhile act of devotion and therefore should be directed to God alone.

To the segment on prayer, Matthew adds his centerpiece, the Lord's Prayer (6:9-13), which the evangelist presents as a model prayer and one that breathes the spirit of authentic "righteousness" (Kiley 1994, 2-27). No New Testament passage has had a greater impact on Christian piety than this, thereby fulfilling Jesus' directive "pray then in this way . . ." (v. 9). At the same time, because of its depth and directness, its eloquent yet unadorned statement of human need before God, the Lord's Prayer is also the most ecumenical of prayers, appealing even beyond the boundaries of the Christian community.

Matthew frames the Lord's Prayer with related sayings. Verses 7-8 provide an introduction by warning the disciples not to "heap up empty phrases" (the Greek term *battalogēō* probably means "babble") and "many words" like Gentiles do. Here "Gentiles" are the negative examples (as in 5:47). The text may have in mind the incantations or magical formulae of some Greco-Roman cults in which names or phrases were repeated, or it may simply be stereotyping the Gentiles as non-Jews who naturally would not know how to pray properly. The notion that God already knows what one needs (and therefore does not need a lot of words) echoes Isa 65:24 and accords with the spirit of Jesus' teaching in 6:32 and 7:7-11. Likewise, verses 14-15 on forgiveness echo a key petition of the Prayer and one of importance for Matthew's Gospel (see 5:23-26, 43-48; 18:21-35).

Luke's version of the Prayer (Luke 11:2-4) is briefer than Matthew's. To Luke's direct address "Father" (perhaps echoing the Aramaic *abba*, a term of affection and respect that may have been typical of Jesus' address for God in prayer), Matthew adds the

pronoun "our" and his typical designation "in heaven." Matthew has also expanded the number of petitions, making a set of three "your" petitions (adding "your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven") and three "we" petitions (adding "rescue us from the evil one").

Matthew's text breathes the spirit of Jewish piety found in such synagogue prayers as the Kaddish and parts of the Eighteen Benedictions, as well as expressing characteristic themes of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel. Such Jewish prayers characteristically begin with praise of God in the manner of the Lord's Prayer, express the desire that God's will be done, pray for the coming of the kingdom, and add succinct petitions (Petuchowski and Brocke 1978; Charlesworth 1994). At the same time, there is no reason to doubt that the peculiar form and content of the Prayer should be attributed to Jesus himself (Betz 1995, 372-73). Matthew's version probably reflects the form this prayer had taken in his community, with its symmetry and greater solemnity harmonizing with its use in public prayer. Even with its Matthean expansions, the Lord's Prayer is terse and pointed. There is no need to contrast its brevity with supposedly longer prayers of Judaism; in fact Jewish piety, too, appreciated prayers that could be brief (Matthew complains about long *Gentile*, not Jewish, prayers).

More recent interpretation of the Prayer has emphasized its eschatological tone (Harner 1975; Brown 1965, 217-53; for extensive bibliography, see Betz 1995, 382-86; and especially Charlesworth 1994, 101-57). As is true of Matthew's theology in general, the expectation of the future advent of God's reign leads to present ethical imperatives. This spirit sweeps through the prayer. The disciple prays, "Our Father," conscious of God's abiding love and nearness to the community; yet, at the same time, God is "in heaven," fully to be revealed only at the end time. The "you" petitions also echo this perspective. The Christian prays that God's name would be "hallowed" (see Lev 22:32; Deut 32:51; Isa 8:13; 29:23)—this is something that ultimately God alone will ensure, but reverence for God's name is also a commitment of the disciple now. The disciple prays that God's "kingdom" will come fully in the future while aware that one is to live now in accord with the

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vision of God's reign. Similarly, God's will is to be done here and now on earth by the obedient disciple as it is done completely in heaven.

The "we" petitions express the practical and urgent needs of the disciple who lives in a world that is not yet fully conformed to God's will. The exact meaning of the petition for "bread" is debated. The Greek term translated in the NRSV as "daily" is *epiousios*, found only here in the New Testament (and in Luke's parallel, 11:3). Its most likely derivation is from the Greek root *epienai* ("to come") and therefore literally meaning the "bread that is coming" or the "bread for tomorrow." Some, therefore, give this petition an eschatological interpretation: One prays for the bread of the future heavenly banquet. Others (reflected in the NRSV translation "daily") see a more practical and urgent sense of the bread one needs for sustenance in the day that looms ahead, making this a prayer of those who live in need day by day.

As with the "you" petitions, it may be best not to set up a sharp cleavage between these alternatives but to make room for both eschatological and present ethical concerns. This seems to be the case with the remaining petitions. The disciple who prays for God's forgiveness from "debts" (Matthew uses the more Jewish term "debt" over Luke's "sins") is also committed to forgiving others, thereby the Prayer links present action with eschatological judgment (as in Matthew's parable of the unforgiving servant, 18:23-35). Likewise, the disciple asks God not to be led into "the test" and to be delivered from "evil" (the NRSV translates this as the "evil one," although the word can also be neuter). Both words, "test" (*peirasmos*) and "evil" or "evil one" (*ponēros*), have a strong eschatological flavor referring to the ultimate test of the final days and the assault of the demonic, but can also be attached to those incursions of threat and evil in the present age, which are, in a sense, anticipations of the final test (as in Jesus' own desert "test," in 4:1-11, and his exorcisms, e.g., in 9:28-34, note especially 9:29).

6:19-7:12: This segment of the Sermon continues Jesus' illustration of authentic righteousness. As noted earlier, this section has a less definable structure, grouping various sayings (almost all of