

DEVELOPING A DISCIPLINED LIFE

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
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Let's Begin

Somebody said "we must all suffer from one of two pains: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret." I cannot say I disagree. And, it has been my experience that the pain of regret is always more severe than the pain of discipline. In a real sense, the Christian life can be defined as a disciplined life. As we continue through the Sermon on the Mount, chapter six stands at the heart of our Lord's concern. It is here He focused on developing a disciplined life. Note the following outline as we proceed in this week's study. To develop a disciplined life, we must:

- I. Develop the Discipline of Selfless Giving (vv. 1-4)**
- II. Develop the Discipline of Secret Prayer (vv. 5-15)**
- III. Develop the Discipline of Sacrificial Fasting (vv. 16-18)**
- IV. Develop the Discipline of Stable Priorities (vv. 19-24)**
- V. Develop the Discipline of Steady Dependence (vv. 25-34)**

I. Develop the Discipline of Selfless Giving (vv. 1-4)

Let us begin our development of the disciplined life with examining our Lord's call to generous and selfless giving: "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them...But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth" (vv. 1, 3).

In the time of Jesus, religion had become almost exclusively outward in nature. The Pharisees of Jesus' day did religious acts to be seen of men. Jesus changed all that. Real religion—the Biblical religion—is a matter of the heart. Anything less, Jesus promised, holds no reward from Heaven but only from men. Jesus warns the Pharisees and those who followed them; "verily I say unto you, they have their reward" (v. 2).

Jesus here used the term translated "alms" which originally had to do with charitable giving. However, the broader picture includes the entire scope of giving, including the support we offer to God through our tithes and other offerings in the local church.

Particularly notice Jesus said, "When thou doest alms" (vv. 2-3). Giving is not an "if" or an option. Giving is a part of one's worship and love for the Lord. *Thus, a Christian's self-less giving is expected.* Again, it's not "if" you give but "why" you give. One gives because giving is indicative of salvation. From the beginning of salvation, to its consummation when Jesus returns for His church, salvation's essence is giving. God gave (cp. John 3:16). Giving is God's nature. It should not surprise us that if we are born of God, selfless giving will be our nature as well.

Giving is also explained by Jesus. The first thing Jesus said is that giving is not "to be seen" of men (v. 1). Instead, giving should be seen by God (v. 4b). In fact, Jesus identifies those who enjoy the looks of the crowds—"hypocrites" (v. 2). The term translated "hypocrites" originally had a neutral or perhaps even positive meaning. It was a theatrical term,

Reflection Connection

Jesus said that those who gave publicly in order to be recognized, honored, and praised by men have received their reward in full. Take a moment to consider what reward is theirs. Although the reward of the Father would have been much greater, what is so enticing about the reward they received? When have you been tempted to opt for the temporal reward rather than the eternal?



used by the actor on the stage who wore a mask, and pretended to be another person. The “hypocrite” entertained the crowd, in fact, to “be seen by them” (v. 1). Jesus, being the masterful teacher He is, used a term known by all, and applied it to the Pharisees’ religion. Jesus’ point was, like the Greek actors who played the role of another, so the Pharisees played the *role* of one dedicated to God, as if they were highly spiritual and specifically, generous givers. They “sounded a trumpet” when they gave, concerned more with what people thought of them than what God thought. When a hen lays an egg in the barn, you can hear her cackling from the kitchen. Unfortunately some Christians are like that! But disciplined givers never advertise their gifts. For them, God knows and that is good enough.

Finally, not only is giving expected and explained here in these verses, but also one’s giving is examined. Moreover, generous, selfless giving seeks examination. Jesus said the Father who sees secretly, rewards openly (v. 4b). Even now, God Himself keeps the books. Nothing escapes Him. God never makes a phony entry or misuses a valid deposit. The child of God can rest assured that nothing you give for His glory will go unnoticed. We must develop the discipline of selfless giving.

II. Develop the Discipline of Secret Prayer (vv. 5-15)

No discipline is either more well-known or more valued than prayer. Perhaps more than any other Christian practice, prayer remains the number one non-negotiable of the Christians’ duties. However, there may be no other practice neglected *more* in the Christian’s life than prayer. *I firmly believe a prayerless soul is a Christless soul.*

Jesus made His opening appeal about the prayer-discipline by bringing up the role of the “hypocrite” a second time (v. 5). Here we find the actor not on the stage, but out in the streets. Somewhat like one would find in downtown areas today, where mimes and clowns perform for donations. The hypocrites particularly liked to strike a pose before they pray, “they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets” (v. 5). In fact, they loved corners because they could gather onlookers from every direction. Once again, Jesus pointed out the hypocrite’s motive for public acclaim. Their prayers are for the eyes of men alone. God sees them, but He will not honor them. Any reward they receive comes from the ones they seek to impress.

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The prayer that Jesus would have the Christian discipline himself to pursue, is the secret prayer: “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet...” (v. 6). The “closet” about which Jesus spoke, was a storeroom in the inner-most part of the home. Being in the center of the structure, it was private, protected from



easy access that a potential thief might exploit. There in the innermost room, hidden away from onlookers, was the place for secret, secluded prayer to happen between the worshipper and God.

In addition, a characteristic of the prayer discipline is sincerity (vv. 7-8). The Pharisees succumbed to their selfish desires and as a result, their prayers lacked authenticity and sincerity. Jesus described what qualified as insincere praying. He first mentioned “vain repetitions” (v. 7). This term means literally “to babble.” The hypocrites seemed to imagine that louder, longer prayer had a greater chance of being heard. Furthermore, believing that if the request was made over and over again—that is, repetitiously—chances were more likely that God would hear. For Jesus, this was just superstitious vanity. The Father knows and hears their babbling, but will not acknowledge them (v. 8).

Finally, disciplined prayer is not only to be secret and marked by sincerity, but disciplined prayer is surprisingly simple (vv. 9-15). Jesus prayed aloud, modeling for believers a simple, uncomplicated prayer. Prayer is talking to God (vv. 9-10), asking from God (vv. 11-13a; 14-15), and offering praise to God (v. 13b). Disciplined prayer need not be long and certainly, it need not be sophisticated. Rather, the prayer Jesus described is secret, sincere, and simple.

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Reflection Connection

Recall the parable Jesus taught in Luke 18:1-8, about the persistent widow. Compare what Jesus said about the repetitious prayer in Matthew 6:7 to his teaching in this parable. How is the widow's prayer one of faith, while the “babblers” prayer is one of annoyance? Describe instances when you have prayed like the widow, and like the “babblers.”

Reflection Connection

In the Old Testament, fasting was often corporate. The entire nation of Israel was called to fast (Leviticus 19:31). What circumstances or situations might lead a church to fast corporately? When would a married couple or family benefit from a time of fasting simultaneously? Keep in mind the sole purpose of fasting.

III. Develop the Discipline of Sacrificial Fasting (vv. 16-18)

If prayer is the most universally known discipline Christians must develop, perhaps fasting is the least well-known and understood. It is certainly the least practiced discipline. Fasting concerns abstaining for a certain period of time, and is sacrificial in its essence. The abstinence could be the sacrifice of something that gives us pleasure, or it could be fasting from a necessity. Thus, fasting could entail abstaining from watching television or, it could be abstaining from food. Whatever the item from which one abstains, fasting is singular in purpose: to seek God. The goal should always be an intense pursuit after the spiritual. Unlike diets, while promoting perhaps bodily health, biblical fasting is primarily concerned with the pursuit of God, the health of the soul, not the body.

Jesus exposed those who fasted to show others how spiritual they were: “Moreover, when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast..”(v. 16). When one decides God is calling him to a fast, it is between him and God. The hypocrite displays their fast for selfish ambitions, to be admired by onlookers. Jesus goes so far as to say that precautions are necessary to disguise the fact (vv. 17-18). Why? While the hypocrite puts on a dramatic performance to ensure their reward from men, the Christian hides his fast to ensure praise from God. *Jesus' teaching to sacrificially fast in private, parallels His teaching on the discipline of selfless giving and secret prayer.*



IV. Develop the Discipline of Stable Priorities (vv. 19-24)

By the very nature of the world we live in, we are “stuff” oriented. Jesus spoke of “stuff” when He described “treasures upon earth.” “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal” (v. 19). These treasures, Jesus makes clear, affect every part of our lives.

First, treasures affect our hearts, and the heart is the seat of our affections (vv. 19-21). Treasures necessitate a place to be stored (vv. 19-20). And our culture is masterful at manipulating us to store our treasures here on earth (v. 19). The term, which translates “lay not up,” means to *not stockpile or stack up to overflow*. Note here that Jesus did not declare an absolute prohibition. In fact, scripture is clear that we are to leave our children an inheritance (2 Corinthians 12:14). But to lay up treasures for one’s own sake, Jesus insists, is completely backward, sinful ordering of priorities. The heart is connected to that order (v. 21). Thus, if the heart is right, everything else will be all right and fall into proper place. Quite the opposite, a Christian who has difficulty in possessing stable priorities should understand that there is a heart problem involved.

Second, treasures influence our minds, affecting our perceptions (vv. 22-23). Stable priorities—that is, sound practice in dealing with earthly treasures—promote right perceptions about life. Jesus spoke of both the “single” eye and the “evil” eye (vv. 22-23). The “evil” eye is obviously dark and disordered; a blurriness coats the “evil” eye. This affects one’s ability to see clearly. The “single” eye is clear, healthy; one that light pours into (v. 22). This person sees the proper priority for earthly treasures and sets them in order. The result is spiritual stability concerning material wealth and earthly possessions.

Third, treasures influence one’s will (v. 24). Jesus spoke here of treasures or “mammon,” as if the treasures could actually own a person as a slave would be owned by their master. In the first century, slaves were the property of the owner and were required to do whatever the master ordered. Just the same, a person can belong to and be subject to their treasures. The power of treasures cannot be underestimated. Earthly wealth can own a person’s will. If this happens, Jesus made it clear that no one can be both faithful to God and given over to earthly treasures simultaneously: “ye cannot serve God and mammon” (v. 24).

Reflection Connection

Materialism is described as the devotion to material wealth and possessions at the expense of spiritual or intellectual values. Even the dictionary admits that you cannot have dual devotion! Loyalty to God equals infidelity towards earthly treasures. How are you actively showing your commitment and dedication to God? Furthermore, how does your bank account and schedule reflect a refusal to love the world and its treasures?

V. Develop the Discipline of Steady Dependence (vv. 25-34)

Our day is marked by an insecure economy, rising prices of gasoline, increased unemployment, and other social maladies. Yet, the uncertainty of circumstances marks every era. It’s easy to lose focus on the sufficiency of God’s supply, even though we know we should be depending on Him, rather than worrying unnecessarily. *A steady dependence on God, who fully supplies our every need, is a discipline the Christian cannot fail to develop.*

Jesus, Himself, grew up among common people. He knew what it was to lack an abundance of material things. In this section, Jesus exhorts believers to win out over worry, by developing one’s discipline of a steady, sturdy, dependence on God.



Jesus begins by defining worry (vv. 25-26). Note His words: “Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; not yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not life more than meat, and the body than raiment?” (v. 25). Here Jesus looks intently at daily life, mentioning daily necessities. About these, Jesus instructs us to “take no thought.” It is not that we become passive, uncaring souls. Instead Jesus is encouraging us to be settled and dependant upon Him. The term translated “take no thought” literally means “to pull in opposite directions.” A common word that works well here is the term *worry*. That is precisely what worry does—it pulls one apart on the inside. A worried mind is a divided mind, a torn mind. Someone said “worry is a thin stream of fear which trickles through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel so wide all other thoughts will be drained out.” In other words, worry guarantees a mind will shift focus from dependence on God to the deficiency of your needs.

Reflection Connection

Anxiety, concern, troubled, loss of sleep, fearful, uneasiness, apprehension, and nervousness collectively summarize the result of one who is in the habit of worrying. Jesus tells us not to worry. Where there is worry, there is a lack of faith. How have you experienced the captivity of worry? Describe the liberation you sensed when that worry departed. How does worry have an effect on a person's children, spouse, friendships, and relationship with God?

Next Jesus describes worry (vv. 27-32). He asks a series of questions about basic needs including status (v. 27), clothing (v. 28), and food (v. 31). The conclusion Jesus confidently reached is captured. “For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things” (v. 32). *In other words, it simply is a useless practice to worry. But it is more.* Worry is also faithless (vv. 28-30). God clothes the fields with grass; therefore, why would He neglect His children (v. 30)?

Worry, therefore is indicative of “little faith.” Where faith is strong, worry is seldom. Where worry is strong, faith is shaky. Worry is both useless and faithless. *Jesus goes further and describes worry as needless (vv. 31-32).* The secret to overcoming worry found here is simply this: a Christian does not *have* to worry.

Finally, *in developing the discipline of steady dependence upon God, Christians must understand that worry can be defeated (vv. 33-34).* Jesus gives two ways to defeat worry.

First, *worry is defeated by assigning first things first.* Jesus clearly says, “But seek ye first the Kingdom of God” (v. 33a). Assigning *first things first* stands as the centerpiece of a worry-free life, and develops a steady dependence on God like nothing else can. If you take care of God’s affairs, all else will fall into perfect position: “and all these things shall be added unto you” (v. 33b). Like a top button on a sweater, if you get this one right, all the others follow flawlessly.

Second, *worry is defeated by allowing the future to be the future (v. 34).* “Take no thought for the morrow” Jesus says, “for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself” (v. 34). Simply, as you know how, live only one day at a time. This does not mean to neglect planning, organizing, and forethought. Rather it means focus one’s energies on today. The only influence one can have for tomorrow is the wise and godly decisions one makes today. The future must be allowed to stand fully under God’s ownership.

Golden Greek Nugget

“To be seen” (v. 1) is one word in the Greek, and it is the very word from which we get our English word “theatrical.” The Pharisees habitually made a performance of their religious acts. This process alone solicited from Jesus a heavenly indictment upon their hollow faith as the rest of the chapter shows.

Wrap Up

The disciplines of the Christian life are vital, if we are to grow in godliness in the Lord. The Christian must understand that as painful as discipline may seem at the time, the rewards from the Father will far outweigh all the hardship and trials. Whether it’s giving, praying, fasting, priorities or faithfulness, we must seek to develop them in our lives for the glory of Jesus.

