

BUILDING SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE
Christ's Keys for Successful Living
Matthew 6:1-4, 16-18
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Our scripture today again comes from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6. This is our fifth look at Christ's sermon – the Keys to Successful Living. Today we look at verses 1-4 of chapter 6 and verses 16-18. *“Be careful not to do your acts of piety or righteousness before men to be seen by them. If you do you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets to be honored by men. I tell you the truth. They have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. When you fast do not look somber as the hypocrites do for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting. But only to your Father who is unseen. And your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”*

As we have looked at chapter 5 and the Sermon on the Mount basically we have considered three questions. First, what kind of person are you becoming? That's the focus of the beatitudes. What kind of influence do you have is the second question of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is concerned that we are not letting others or the world shape our attitudes. But that we become a shaper. Salt and light. The third question of chapter 5 is do your actions identify you as a disciple of the Lord. How do you deal with anger and lust? Are you faithful within marriage? Do you keep your word? How do you deal with a difficult person in your life? Those are the kinds of concerns that Jesus raises in respect to this third question – Do you identify with him as his disciple?

Suppose as you sailed along through chapter 5 you looked at it and said, I'm making progress. I'm grateful to the Lord I see significant growth in my life. I'm coming to a greater sense of spiritual maturity than I've ever had before. Then we're caught by surprise with the opening of chapter 6 where the word is “Beware... or Be careful.” There is a sense in which there is always on the underside of our spiritual attainments a dangerous temptation to spiritual pride. To say I have arrived. I have it made. I'm doing ok. There is a sense that to build proper self-esteem we need to be saying that. But there also is a sense where we can so easily settle into a kind of “I'm ok. Look at me. I'm proud. I'm glad I've attained. I feel sorry for people who haven't.” Sort of a spirit. It's that that the Lord is concerned with here.

Temptation always exists that we will use spirituality to call attention to ourselves. Jesus talks therefore to us about some areas of spiritual discipline where we are most prone to be tempted. To turn what is good in our life into bad. The areas of giving and praying and fasting. We'll simply look at the first and third areas today and look at praying in our next time together.

There is such a delicate balance in the Christian life. Jesus here is saying in regard to spiritual disciplines don't let what you're doing be seen by men. But on the other hand he has told us in the earlier part of chapter 5 that you are the light of the world. So let your deeds shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. A light can't be hid.

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On the one hand he's telling us we're going to be light and we're going to be seen. The next moment he turns around and tells us not to be seen. It's paradoxical. But the balance has to do with motivation. If our motive in serving the Lord is to really serve him then others are going to be able to look at us from a standpoint of observation and say, Their heart really exalts the Lord they serve. If however our motivation is somehow to gain enhancement or gain standing with people because of our own righteous deeds then really they will not be able to see the Lord. They will not glorify the Father who is in heaven. They will glorify us.

As we look at these spiritual disciplines, we'll begin where Jesus begins. The discipline of giving, verses 2-4. There is far more that the scripture has to say on giving than are in these three verses. I want to take a moment therefore to identify the major themes of the scripture in respect to giving. Then place Jesus' teaching here in the context of what the totality of scripture bears witness to.

First, the scripture bears witness to the principle that God never intended for us to use our income to meet only our own needs. Our income was never designed simply to meet our own needs or our own family needs. Throughout both the Old and the New Testament we are consistently taught to give from our own income to the work of the Lord and to meet the needs of others. Even poor people are commended for giving out of their poverty such as the widow who gave her mites and thereby gave all she had. Such as the Macedonian saints of 2 Corinthians who Paul commends for giving out of their poverty. It was not easy for them to give. They did not have luxury to live and therefore they couldn't give out of luxury. They gave out of their poverty. They recognized this principle that some of what I earn belongs to the Lord's work and to others.

On the other hand the rich fool who made plans to only spend on himself – tear down his barns and build bigger ones had his life taken from him in a moment.

There are some attitudes about material possessions that are clearly seen in the parable the Lord tells of the Good Samaritan. Three attitudes of life toward giving. The attitude of the robber is the attitude that many have in the world. What's yours is mine if I can get it. There are people in business that are just sharpening their pencil or their ax all the time to see how they can beat somebody else out of a buck. It doesn't matter if they beat them out of it unfairly.

The attitude of the priest and Levite as they passed by very smugly on the other side of the road is what's mine is mine and you can't have it.

The attitude of the Good Samaritan is the attitude of a disciple. What's mine is yours if you need it.

If you use your income only for yourself and your family then you stand outside of God's will for your life. You develop traits that are harmful to yourself. Self-centeredness. Failure to obey God and trust him to meet the needs you have. One of the things you learn when you give is you have to trust God to meet the resources you've given away. That's an exciting experiment in faith. You lose compassion. You fail to identify with the Lord who himself is the giving one. Giving is something, which the Lord teaches us. We're never to use our income only for ourselves.

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Second principle of giving is we are to distinguish between required and voluntary giving in the scripture. Jesus here in Matthew 6 is talking about voluntary giving. Kind of benevolent giving which we feel motivated in our heart as we see a need.

The scripture also talks about required giving. Malachi 3:10 coming at the end of the Old Testament summarizes all the Old Testament law in respect to giving to the Lord's work. "*Bring the tithe into the storehouse.*" Jesus affirms the action of tithing in Matthew 23.

Additionally in the scripture acts of benevolence are required. For example the farmer was required to not cut the edges, the corners of his fields. He was to leave the grain or whatever he had planted standing there so that the poor could come through and glean and have something mandated by the law.

Earlier in my Christian life I made some mistakes in giving. To give to the Lord's work was a struggle for me. Even when I was first married and teaching my first year in a Christian college. Since our deeds are not to be seen by men nobody knew I wasn't giving. Some weeks I'd tithe and some weeks I wouldn't. I'd feel a little bit condemned but we had too many bills. We went from one financial disaster to another. Finally I said things couldn't get any worse, even if I tithed. I started to tithe and I've been at it for the last 17 years. Wonder of wonders, I've found that as the Lord builds that discipline into your life, it gets easier as the years go by. In fact the first check I write out and the check I take the greatest joy in writing is the check to the Lord's work. I find more joy in making out that check than I do for my own mortgage.

Beyond the required giving there are all kinds of options for voluntary giving.

The third major principle of giving is the one Jesus teaches here in Matthew 6. We must guard against wrong motivation in giving. Recognition is an important motive for giving. It's a well-recognized principle by professional fundraisers. People want their giving to be noticed. Here's a need not only to give but a need to be recognized when we give.

Jesus here indicates his disciples are to go cross grain against this. Not give from a motivation to be recognized. One look around the body of Christ today convinces you rather quickly that on this matter the Lord is commonly ignored. It works but we must be concerned with the means be consistent with the ends. We think the Lord has the project so on his heart that it doesn't matter what we do to get it. He just wants it done. But he's just as concerned with how we do something as what we ultimately do.

Almost every day we're besieged by Christian organizations with gimmicks designed to motivate us to give. In the Christian industry they're called "give aways." A ministry must have a give away to get a doner to release their money. So you're offered a tape, a book, a record, a trinket with the hope that you'll send back money at least ten times what they gave you. You need to recognize that if we respond to that kind of motive we're reconfiguring our giving. What happens over a period of time is we unthinkingly fall into behavior patters. All of a sudden we find ourselves not giving in a biblically appointed way. Where has simplicity in giving gone? What is left of the idea that we give because there's a real need or because the Holy Spirit lays it upon our heart. The only one we want recognized is the Lord. Have we gotten so complicated that we've forgotten that essential? I'd even be so bold to suggest that we ought to give even if the IRS doesn't give us credit for giving. As a citizen obedient to the government I'm happy to

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take all the privileges the government will allow. No problems with that in my conscious. But if they take that away it shouldn't effect my giving one iota.

Giving because we want to give to the Lord.

Fasting is a second area the Lord speaks of here. Verses 16-18. Any time spent walking with the Lord leads us to a conclusion that sin is so powerful and so deceptive that it can infiltrate our noblest deeds. There's nothing more noble than fasting. That's a rigorous spiritual discipline. Here it can become an occasion not for righteousness but for sin. The devil can get in to our noblest, finest moments and he does this if like the Pharisees we begin to call attention to the spiritual disciplines that we perform.

Our Lord here corrects the abuse of fasting. He assumes that he will fast. He does not say *If* you fast in verse 16. He says *When* you fast. As you look at scripture there are three good reasons for fasting. At least three.

Fasting first is a sign of barrenness. And it expresses the desire for greater fruitfulness. I find the first mention of fasting in the Bible to occur in the story of Hanna told in 1 Samuel 1. She was barren. She was without child. She was distressed. Her grief was so great she could not eat. She fasted. Out of that condition of barrenness God heard her prayer and gave her the child Samuel. The total absence of fasting in our life may be an indication that we are not sufficiently hungry for God to be at work in our lives. We have too easily settled into a pattern of comfort. Fasting is for those who recognize that only God can really make them fruitful.

The second purpose for fasting is that it precedes major decisions or actions. Jesus fasted 40 days prior to beginning his ministry. Probably that was a food fast, not a water fast. Because at the end of the time the devil did not say, "Turn this rock into water." That would have been the temptation had he been fasting water. He couldn't have lived physically if he had gone that long without water. It was a food fast. But Jesus food fasted for 40 days prior to his beginning his ministry. Before the first missionary journey ever began Paul and Barnabus were worshipping the Lord and fasting. Acts 13.

Once you get past the hunger pains in fasting you find yourself unusually open and sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit.

I would never have lasted as pastor of this church in the early days had I not preceded the decision to come here with a time of fasting. I set aside an amount of time and said "Lord, during that time I'm going to fast. If at any time I break the fast, I know I don't have the spiritual strength to really go out and leave the safety of the Ozarks for wild and wooly California. On the other hand, God, while I'm fasting and if I don't break the fast, you have an obligation to check me if this is not your will. If I make it through this fast and you haven't checked me don't ever throw it up to me that I got out of your will." I was just that blunt with the Lord. I needed that because when I accepted the pastorate of this church there were 73 member. Six months later there were 48. We were growing but in the reverse direction. All human signs pointed to the fact that the church had made a horrendous mistake and so had I. But it was that time of fasting where God had confirmed his will that locked that choice in and made me confident that I had God's will.

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When you're facing a major decision and especially the decision of marriage, which has got to be a major decision. It would be well that we set aside significant blocks of time for prayer and fasting to confirm God's will.

Sometimes you may fast food and water. Sometimes only food. Sometimes God may have you fast something other than food.

A particular matter I was agitated in my spirit and I wanted to press my will onto a group that didn't see things the way I did. I got very upset and frustrated. I was ready to unleash anger and manipulation to get them to change their mind. Then I heard the Holy Spirit say in my inner heart "George, fast your tongue!" I never thought of that. I took that as a literal word from the Lord and for the next week didn't say a think to anyone about the situation I was so agitated about. Just prayed about it. Wonder of wonders the Lord had it worked out with in a week. It doesn't hurt us sometimes to fast our tongue.

A third reason for fasting is it may be an appropriate way to express a somber reaction to the Lord. In the Old Testament there are moments of great revival when God's people or their leaders repent somberly with fasting. 1 Samuel 7 and Ezra 10. The somberness might be expressed in the heavy burden such as Nehemiah felt for broken down walls. Or the somberness might be expressed in a time of great danger, 2 Chronicles 20 when Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah faced a tremendous army against them and they fasted that God would give them strength in the victory. The psalmist when faced with a life-threatening situation cried out in his somberness, Psalm 109. *"My knees give way from fasting. By body is thin and gaunt."*

Jesus says his disciples would fast when the bridegroom was taken from them. The time of rejoicing and banqueting was over and the time of somberness had come. Mark 2 and Luke 5. If your life is so filled with wonderful events that you know no sorrow, perhaps through fasting God can acquaint you with his burdens and the heartbreak in the world.

There is a word of caution that I should say to people who stay too long in a time of sorrow and perhaps fast with it. There is a time to weep and a time to rejoice. We're not to stay in sorrow or somberness indefinitely. The Lord fasted but he came out of that fast and turned around and ate with sinners and tax collectors and was happy.

There's a marvelous story in the Old Testament, 2 Samuel 12 of David when his child born of the illicit union with Bathsheba came into life, he fasted for a week that that child might live. At the end of 7 days the child died and David's servants were terrified to tell him that the child had died. They said if he's acted like this when the child was ill what's he going to act like when the child dies? When he finally discerned that they were talking about this he said, "Has the boy died?" And they said yes. So he went in and washed and put on fresh cloths and put on things to make him smell good and ordered a big meal and sat down and ate it. They were astounded. They said, "We don't understand this. When the boy was alive you fasted. Now he's dead and it's the natural time for mourning. You should be mourning and you're doing this. We don't understand." David said, "While there was yet hope I fasted that the God of heaven would hear my prayer. But when he died there was nothing more I could do so I've changed my clothes and I've ordered food." There is a recognition sometimes in life that we need to make that a situation is that way and it's not going to change. We need to go on and become unstuck from our somberness and our sorrow and move into other dimensions of our life.

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In regard to both giving and fasting Jesus talks about reward. He says if we will give and pray and fast to be seen by him rather than by men he will reward us. What is the nature of his reward? The whole concept of reward is a difficult one to grasp since when we think of reward we tend to think in terms of trophies. Churches also have this. There is various recognition for giving – missions giving and all that. Churches can get big trophies and the like and display them.

The reward we look for being married, it is not something external. It involves relationship that moves into a far deeper and more meaningful level. Some people when they think of rewards in heaven think only from a materialistic view. Mansions and gold and space travel. The real reward of heaven is the intensified relationship we will enjoy with the Lord. Then we shall see Him face to face. The marvelous thing is we won't be jealous of any body else's reward either.

The Lord is aware of the spiritual disciplines I live out before him. Disciplines no one else may be aware of. He sees my giving or my lack of it, my praying or my lack of it, my fasting or my lack of it. It's a secret between him and me. If I pray and fast then I don't gain entrance into heaven for doing those things. That was already settled in the first beatitude, which starts with grace. I am broke. I don't have anything to buy my way into the kingdom of God. I must receive that kingdom as a gift. So by giving and praying and fasting I'm not buy in my way into heaven but somehow that spiritual discipline is drawing me nearer unto him and even deepening the relationship we will enjoy for all eternity. The Lord now and in the coming days reviews my checkbook and my calendar book. He's going to review the ledger with me. He's going to review these appointments I've made. And he's going to ask me are there certain things you've thought of and done reflect things that only you and I know, appointments we've kept. He's going to reward me in that way someday. Not as the reward of salvation but as the reward somehow of intensified relationship there's mystery there that I don't understand at all. I do know that I love to reward people who do something that they don't want a reward. Nothing makes me happier than to see a person doing something really great and they're not doing it to get recognized. That's how I think God feels about us.

As we live our life before the Lord, the Lord knows and he'll reward accordingly.

Our heavenly Father we thank you for these moments when we can again hear the words of Jesus. Some of us may consider these disciplines of prayer, or fasting and giving as strange entities in our life because we are not yet in our experience at that level of discipline. Our prayer would first be that we could begin to enter into an experience of these areas as we live out our lives before you. Help us to look at the things in our own life that motivate us to do things for others even within family and to develop a motivation which causes us to do things because they're right to do, because you want them done and because they're lived out quietly before you, for your notice and not for others. Teach us to live holy lives. Make us as a people, as a giving and fasting people, entrust us with power. Power with you and power with our world, power with others. As an entire body Lord, make us fasting and giving and praying people for the exaltation of your name in this community. We ask this Lord in your name. Amen.