

Lesson 2 | December 10, 2023

The Christ-Disciplined Life

Study Text Matthew 6:1–34

Central Truth: A life governed by Christ requires undivided loyalty to Him.

Key Verse: Matthew 6:24

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other (KJV).

“No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other” (NLT).

Learning Objectives:

- Students will pray, fast, and give from godly motives.
- Students will reject money as the lord of their lives.
- Students will discover how to live free from anxiety.

Introducing the Study

Say: Most people can tell the difference between an authentic person and someone who is trying to impress them. A phony person may look genuine at first, but the truth will come out before long. Unfortunately, some people can live a lie for so long, they even begin to deceive themselves.

Opening Activity—Living a Lie

Ask: What television or movie characters can you think of who lived a lie? Why might people hide behind a false image of themselves?

Say: The Pharisees of Jesus’ day had begun to believe the lie they were living. They thought they were serving God when truthfully they were just consumed with religious activity. They kept the Law but missed the point. Christians must avoid following the Pharisees down this dangerous path. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The Christian life is an authentic life. People often reject God because they see the hollowness of some who claim to be Christians. Authentic Christians should be filled with joy, even when life is difficult. They should be honest about their struggles, facing them without anxiety and fear.

Today we will continue to look at Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, specifically His teachings in Matthew 6 about serving God with the right motives, making God our true Master, and trusting God to meet all our needs.

Part 1—Give, Pray, and Fast

Motivation Matters

Matthew 6:1–8, 16–18

Say: It is possible to do good things from selfish motives. As believers, we must continually ask ourselves if our good deeds are an attempt to impress others or earn God's favor. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In Jesus' day, a Pharisee's identity was tied to his religious practices. These religious leaders wanted to ensure people knew how devoted they were to God, so their so-called piety was on full display. When they gave money, they announced it publicly so everyone would admire their generosity (Matthew 6:2). When they prayed, they did it on the corner of the street so everyone could hear their lofty words (verse 5). When they fasted, they tried to "look miserable and disheveled" so everyone would know they were doing their religious duty (verse 16, NLT).

Although Jesus taught that giving, prayer, and fasting were important, He clarified they must be done with the right motive. He took the focus off the person giving, praying, or fasting and put the focus back on God himself. God should be the only One we are trying to please. If we do any good work to receive recognition from others, then the approval we receive from them is our full reward.

Another selfish motive might be doing a good deed to improve one's own life. God-honoring giving does not ask, "What will I get in return for what I give?" God-honoring prayer should include others' needs as we trust Him to care for us. And God-honoring fasting is never an attempt to manipulate God. Our good works should reflect our love for God and our love for others (22:34–40).

Jesus was not suggesting we take our faith underground. In fact, He said His followers were "like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden" (5:14, NLT). But Jesus is focused on our intentions. If we obey God simply to receive people's attention and applause, our motives are compromised and our rewards are temporary. God has promised eternal rewards to those who selflessly channel His love and do their good deeds in secret.

Discuss

? In what ways might the attitude of the Pharisees be manifested in the church world today?

? What practical steps can believers take to give, pray, and fast without putting on a show?

The Right Way to Pray

Matthew 6:9–15

Say: In the middle of discussing the motivation for spiritual disciplines, Jesus took time to teach His disciples how to pray. He had already warned against "vain repetitions" (Matthew 6:7, KJV), so He next gave them a model prayer—a template, so to speak. The Lord's Prayer helps us focus on what matters most when we converse with God. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Christians' prayers often reveal a great deal about their contentment. Sometimes prayers are little more than a laundry list of wants and wishes. However, effective prayer focuses on Kingdom expansion and God's will being accomplished on earth as it is in heaven. That includes praying for strength to live righteously and represent God well. Jesus did not say we should never pray for personal needs, but we must keep our priorities in order.

Resource Packet Item 1: The Lord's Prayer

Distribute the information sheet and refer to it while teaching. Encourage students to use it as a guide in their personal prayer times.

The opening words of the Lord's prayer—"Our Father in heaven" (verse 9, NLT)—establish our relationship with God, which lays the foundation for the conversation to come. The next phrase shows reverence to God: "May your name be kept holy" (verse 9, NLT). We often approach God as the Giver of gifts (which He is) or the Solver of problems (which He is), but first and foremost He is the one true God. He deserves our worship for that reason alone.

In verse 10, Jesus models submission to God, praying that His kingdom would come to earth and His will would be done on earth. The prayer then shifts into petitions. He expects us to ask Him to provide for our needs—and even our desires—but those needs and desires often change as we recognize who He is and submit to Him. That new house or car may seem less important when we begin to pray for the expansion of His kingdom. The example Jesus gives the disciples includes praying simply for sustenance before moving on to our deeper needs—receiving and extending mercy and accessing God's strength to withstand temptation.

Discuss

- ? How do your typical prayers compare to the model prayer Jesus gave?
- ? What are some specific things you can pray about that would expand the kingdom of God?

Part 2—Lay Up Treasures in Heaven Wise Investments

Matthew 6:19–23

Say: The Broadway musical *Cabaret* includes a song that epitomizes the philosophy of much of our society: "Money Makes the World Go Around." It is true that greed dominates many people's lives, but Jesus teaches us a better way to live. By adopting His point of view, we can handle our finances in a way that honors God and furthers the Kingdom. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus warned, "Don't store up treasures here on earth" (Matthew 6:19, NLT). Christians should manage finances wisely, keeping in mind that earthly possessions never last. If

our security is based on our wealth, we are only fooling ourselves. Possessions gradually depreciate and can even be stolen. And no matter how safe our investments seem to be, they can disappear in a moment.

However, Jesus offered an investment that always yields a return. When we use our finances to help bring people into the Kingdom, we accumulate a reward that will await us in eternity—the reward of seeing heaven populated.

The places people choose to invest their resources reveal the condition of their hearts (verse 21). Jesus illustrated His point by describing healthy and unhealthy eyes (verses 22–23). Those with healthy eyes are filled with light and see opportunities to expand the Kingdom and invest wisely. Those with unhealthy eyes are consumed by darkness and do not even see the needs around them. Sadly, some Christians are so busy accumulating personal wealth that their hearts are hardened and their eyes are blind to spiritual needs.

Discuss

? What do you think is the proper balance between caring for your family’s needs, planning for the future, meeting others’ needs, and investing in the kingdom of God?
? Some Christians are offended when a pastor talks about money the way Jesus did in Matthew 6. What does our attitude about money reveal about us?

Servant of God or Money?

Matthew 6:24

Say: We may not like the way it sounds, but we are all servants. As Bob Dylan put it, “It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”¹ Whether we choose to serve God or bow to Satan and the influences of our culture, we can only have one master. Our priorities are the deciding factor. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Christians often refer to Jesus as Lord and Savior, but if Jesus is truly our Lord, we will choose to obey and serve Him alone. Claiming loyalty to Jesus means nothing if a person’s choices reveal they serve a different master. Today’s consumer mentality stands in opposition to Kingdom values. Christians are called to leave behind the pursuit of temporary treasures.

This involves asking ourselves if we make decisions based on financial ramifications or God’s direction. If we base our choices on what we can afford, we are likely allowing money to control us. When we give God complete control of our lives, our decisions look much different. He is not limited by our bank accounts. He will faithfully show us the best path forward as we obey Him.

Resource Packet Item 2: Decisions, Decisions

1. Bob Dylan, “Gotta Serve Somebody,” *Slow Train Coming*, Columbia Records, 1979.

Distribute the worksheet. After students finish, ask a few to share one of their decisions with the class.

Jesus used the phrase “enslaved to money” (Matthew 6:24, NLT) to show the powerful draw of wealth. Christians may think they are in control of their finances, but if we don’t allow God to guide us in this area, we will soon find ourselves completely consumed with money. People bound by materialism never have enough and anxiety is their constant companion. Jesus’ use of the words “love” and “hate” shows the incompatibility between a Kingdom mindset and a materialistic mindset. Jesus is clear: “You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money” (verse 24, NLT).

Discuss

- ? Is it possible for Jesus to be our Savior without also being our Lord? Explain.
- ? Why do you think many Christians carry financial debt? What does buying things we can’t afford reveal about our view of God?

Part 3—Trust God’s Providence

Faith in God

Matthew 6:25–32

Say: Faith is often misconstrued as believing hard enough to get whatever you want from God. People even attempt to camouflage their love of money and possessions with a prosperity theology. But this isn’t how the Bible defines faith. Instead, scriptural faith recognizes who God is and trusts Him to do the right thing all the time. Christians who embrace this kind of faith live with contentment and peace. They know deep down that God can be trusted. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus instructed us to not worry about food, drink, or clothing, asserting worry is wasted energy. Part of the spiritual battle between desiring material things and eternal things is related to our view of God. If we believe God cares for us, knows what we need, and will supply those needs, there is no need to worry. The Father feeds the birds and clothes the lilies without ever being asked. If animals and plants are so well cared for, can we not trust the Father to provide for us too? Our answer to that question is linked to our faith. When we worry about God providing the things we need to survive, we reveal how little faith we truly have in Him.

To be clear, Jesus wasn’t saying His followers should not work hard or make plans. Instead, He was addressing the gnawing anxiety that comes from not fully trusting God. Worry shows we do not really believe our Heavenly Father will give us what we need. “These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers,” Jesus said, “but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs” (Matthew 6:32, NLT). Spending precious time and energy worrying about basic needs is the behavior of people who do not know God. Jesus called us to something higher. We can have complete confidence in our Heavenly Father. He knows what we need, has the power to provide it, and loves us enough to do

so. Living with this kind of faith frees us up to focus on eternal things rather than being consumed by the here and now.

Resource Packet Item 3: Alternatives to Worry

Distribute the worksheet and suggest that students complete the activity during their personal devotions.

Discuss

? What is your definition of faith? How does that definition shape your perspective of God and your prayers?

? How do we balance Jesus' teaching about worry with the wisdom of planning and preparing for the future?

Put God First

Matthew 6:33–34

Say: Jesus calls us to focus our attention on God instead of our circumstances. As the hymn famously phrases it, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”² When we seek God’s kingdom first, He will take care of the rest of our concerns. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

When we answer Jesus’ call to replace worry with faith, our focus changes completely. Our thoughts are no longer dominated by our own desires, but we start to notice the needs of others and pray about how we can expand God’s kingdom on earth—just as Jesus taught us to pray. This change in focus is spiritually freeing, and our commitment is rewarded. When we respond in obedience as God directs us to invest our time, energy, and resources, He keeps His promise and supplies everything we need.

Two points are critical here. Believers are to (1) “seek the Kingdom of God above all else” and (2) “live righteously” (Matthew 6:33, NLT). “Kingdom” points to God’s will being fulfilled. “Righteously” emphasizes an inner commitment to holiness that affects every thought, motive, and action. Jesus enunciated the principle that had been established way back in the Garden of Eden: If human beings seek God’s priorities and live in righteous obedience, He will faithfully provide for all of their needs.

Our lives are transformed when we follow these guidelines. Seeking God’s kingdom and righteousness draws our attention away from the endless worry Jesus warned against, so we are freed to serve people and serve God as we trust Him to supply our needs.

Matthew 6 closes with Jesus’ instruction to let go of the past and not worry about the future (verse 34). There is nothing wrong with planning for the future, but Jesus told us, “Don’t worry about tomorrow” (NLT). Our God created and sustains everything from

2. Helen H. Lemmel, “Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus,” London, England, 1918.

galaxies to geraniums, so He is able to take care of those who humbly follow Him one day at a time.

Discuss

? How would you respond if your children spoke to you the same way you speak to God during prayer?

? How would the daily application of Matthew 6:33–34 change your priorities and your attitude toward life?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Faithfully following God means trusting Him and serving Him with the right motives. Spiritual disciplines like giving, praying, and fasting are not for impressing others, earning God's favor, or getting whatever we want. Instead, they equip us to serve God better and expand the kingdom of heaven. Taking our eyes off our own selfish desires and fully recognizing the greatness of God helps us learn to trust Him and submit to Him as Lord. As we follow Him more closely every day, we find contentment, and worry and anxiety fade away.

Living It Out Ministry in Action

- Evaluate your reasons for praying, fasting, and giving. If you discover selfish motivations, repent and seek to practice these spiritual disciplines out of a pure love for God.
- Assess the role of money in your life. If you discover money has become your lord, repent and ask God to realign your thinking.
- Determine the source of any anxiety in your life. Ask God to help you trust Him so you can truly live in spiritual freedom.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

A Learner Succeeds His Mentor.
Deuteronomy 31:1–8

Tuesday:

A Young Disciple Hears God.
1 Samuel 3:1–10

Wednesday:

A Determined Disciple Follows.
1 Kings 2:5–15

Thursday:

The Disciple and His Master.
Matthew 10:22–26

Friday:

The Disciple's Commitment.
Luke 14:25–33

Saturday:

The Secret Disciple.
John 19:38–42