



Time to Reflect

- In what ways are you, personally, encouraged by the Christian message? How could you make this known to other people?
- In what ways do we approach giving, prayer and fasting? Are they defining characteristics of our Christian journey?

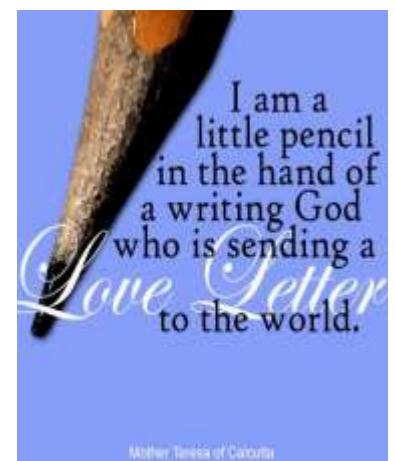
Last week we thought about Christian love as we focused on an incredibly powerful passage. It got us thinking about radical generosity, unending kindness, and a depth of faith that is simply inspiring. We discovered exactly what John Stott meant when he referred to these verses as the most admired and yet most challenging part of the Sermon on the Mount. This week our study calls our attention to giving, prayer and fasting – what we are describing as a Christian's religion.

“...authentic Christian righteousness is not an external manifestation only, but one of the secret things of the heart.

(John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, p126.)

Passage Specifics

- In 1975 Bill Hybels was in the process of setting up Willow Creek Church in USA. He spent some time going from door-to-door in a town called Palatine, and as he did so he asked the same question – “Do you go to church?” If the answer was no, he then asked a second question – “Would you be willing to tell me why you don’t?” One of the most frequent answers that he received was – “It’s irrelevant to daily life...when I went to church, I found no answers.”
- While this answer broke his heart, in a strange way, it also encouraged him! He realised that people were still seeking for fulfilment, purpose, and relevance – even if they did not know where to look.
- He knew that genuine and authentic Christianity could offer the answers to the questions that these people were asking, and that it could give them hope and lasting peace.
- Today, forty-five years later, the situation has not really changed. Our societies are packed full of people who are asking the big questions of life and God’s people need to be ready and willing to answer. We have a Gospel to proclaim, Good News that can transform lives.
- The best way for us to preach the Good News is by living it out – showing the world that we have been transformed by Jesus, that our lives have purpose, and we are people of hope.
- Connected to this there are two big lessons for us from this brilliant passage. As Christians we need to be, firstly, genuine and, secondly, prayerful.



1. Genuine Faith

- It is clear, from this passage, that Jesus calls us to be humble. We’re not to do our acts of righteousness before other people (v1); we shouldn’t boast about our giving (v2); we should avoid

becoming performers in our prayer lives (v5); and we should realise that fasting is a spiritual activity and not something to make us appear extra holy (v16).

- What Jesus is looking for in our lives is an authentic, genuine, faith through which we choose God (and not other people) to be our audience, and by which we can point people to our Lord.
- In other words, our focus needs to be on God and not on acquiring status among other people.
- Some of the great heroes of faith throughout history were deeply humble people. The story is told of Hudson Taylor, who was scheduled to speak at a large Presbyterian church in Melbourne, Australia. The moderator of the service introduced the missionary in eloquent and glowing terms. He told the large congregation about everything that Taylor had accomplished in China, and then presented him as 'our illustrious guest.' Taylor stood quietly for a moment, and then opened his message by saying, "Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master."
- Jesus offers three practical lessons: giving (v2-4), praying (v5-6), and then fasting (v16-18).
- **Giving.** Jesus was born in a stable. No fanfare, no pomp, no signposts to announce His birth. Only great humility. God wants us to follow that no fuss example (v2). The Pharisees are repeatedly singled out in this passage. John Stott reminds us, "Jesus paints a picture of the hypocrites' way of being religious...Such receive the reward they want, the applause of men."
- **Prayer** – Stott argues that "...our religious devotions should be secret lest we boast about them." Prayer times are opportunities for us to spend time with God and communicate with him. They are not moments for self-publicity (v7). Jesus encourages us to close the door, remove distractions and minimise disturbances. He is challenging us to draw intimately close with God.
- **Fasting** – this is a spiritual discipline which helps us draw closer to God. There are plenty of Biblical examples of people who fasted: Moses, King Jehoshaphat, Queen Esther, Ezra, Paul, Barnabas, and most famous of all – Jesus. Again, Jesus tells us that the purpose of fasting is not to appear holy but to seek more of God in our lives (v17-18).
- Jesus urges and challenges us to be genuine and humble followers, individuals who are more concerned about our walks with God than receiving a pat on the back from other people. God must be first in our lives and one thing that can help us on our journey is to develop a prayerful faith.

2. **Prayerful Faith**

- Two men were talking together. The first challenged the other, "If you are so religious, let's hear you quote the Lord's Prayer. I'll give you £10 if you can." The second responded, "Now I lay my head down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." The first pulled out his wallet and fished out a £10 note, muttering, "I didn't think you could do it!"
- This illustration reminds us about the importance of prayer and being aware of the building blocks of the Christian faith. Next week we will be looking more fully at prayer but, for now, note how Jesus said "...when you pray..." (v5). He did not say 'if you pray' or 'should you pray.'
- Prayer needs to be central to our Christian journey. It also needs to be honest, authentic, and reflective of the faith that we have in God.
- We need to be people of prayerful faith, people who come before God with openness and humility, seeking His touch in our lives, and confident that God is willing and able to hear our prayers.
- Someone once said, "What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more novel methods, but people whom the Holy Spirit can use - people of prayer, people mighty in prayer."
- May each of us be authentic and prayerful, willing to be used by the Holy Spirit for the purposes of seeing God's Kingdom grow. Let us commit ourselves to be pencils in the hand of a writing God.