

Healthy Church
Session Eight: Worship, Giving, Prayer
Commentary

John 4:21-24

4:21–24. In this passage we find one of the strongest worship statements in the New Testament. Ten of John's thirteen uses of the Greek word for worship appear in these few verses. We learn immediately that place is irrelevant and that worship is not primarily in body—through physical motions and activities—but in spirit. The text does not refer to the Holy Spirit but an attitude of heart which acknowledges God and his sovereignty over our lives. Furthermore, worship must be done in truth—honestly, biblically, centered on Christ. This paragraph shows the difference between religion and the gospel: religion describes humankind's search for God; the gospel describes the way God reached down to humanity.

But the repeated phrase a time is coming grabs our attention, especially in view of the addition in verse 23—and has now come. Is this the same "hour" as the one we encountered in John 2:4? Borchert thinks so and suggests, "The mention of 'hour' here is a Johannine theme which encapsulates the decisive moment in history of the crucifixion and resurrection that transformed and continues to transform human reality" (Borchert, Gerald L. *John*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 207). Yes, that is the common way the word is used throughout the epistle. But there seems to be something uncommon about this occasion, precisely because of the phrase has now come.

Rather than the hour of crucifixion, the emphasis here seems to rest upon the first advent. The Messiah has appeared; the gospel has already been proclaimed; life and light are available. True believers must stop this mindless, endless, meaningless bickering about sites and sounds of worship. God is not interested in Jews or Samaritans, Presbyterians or Methodists, Calvinists or Arminians. He is interested in worshipers who must worship in spirit and in truth.

Nevertheless, honesty and candor required that Jesus correct the woman's theological error: the Samaritans were wrong since salvation is from the Jews. But that was an Old Testament argument and a new time has come, bringing with it a new attitude and aura of worship. Temples and tabernacles, mountains and cities were fading symbols of the past, shadows of the spiritual reality who now stood before her. Marcus Dods states the point eloquently:

Rich music, striking combinations of colour and of architectural forms, are nothing to God so far as worship goes, except insofar as they bring the human spirit into fellowship with Him. Persons are differently constituted, and what is natural to one will be formal and artificial to another. Some worshippers will always feel that they get closer to God in private, in their own silent room, and with nothing but their own circumstances and wants to stimulate; they feel that a service carefully arranged and abounding in musical effects does indeed move them, but does not make it easier for them to address themselves to God. Others, again, feel differently; they feel that they can best worship God in spirit when the forms of worship are expressive and significant. But in two points all will agree: first, that in external worship, while we strive to

keep it simple, we should also strive to make it good—the best possible of its kind. If we are to sing God’s praise at all, then let the singing be the best possible, the best music a congregation can join in, and executed with the utmost skill that care can develop. Music which cannot be sung save by persons of exceptional musical talent is unsuitable for congregational worship; but music which requires no consideration, and admits of no excellence, is hardly suitable for the worship of God. I do not know what idea of God’s worship is held by persons who never put themselves to the least trouble to improve it so far as they are concerned. The other point in which we all will agree, is that where the Spirit is not engaged there is no worship at all (Dods, Marcus. *The Gospel of Saint John* (2 vols.). London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908, pp. 156–57).¹

Matthew 6:1-15

6:1. This first verse serves as an introduction to all of 6:1–18. It establishes the theme of doing acts of righteousness before men, and thus losing reward from your Father in heaven. Matthew recorded the term Father seventeen times in the sermon, something fresh to Jewish ears. Jesus was emphasizing the reality of a relationship. The Pharisees practiced a performance-oriented “works-righteousness” apart from any relationship. For Jesus, this was unacceptable. It was the same problem the rich young ruler would demonstrate. What humans consider “righteous” is worthless. Jesus’ exhortation Be careful is the present tense form, and emphasizing the need to be on the alert to the temptation to seek our reward from men.

Jesus was not condemning the righteous acts themselves. Genuineness was his focus, not the acts themselves. His concern was the motivation behind the actions. The same act of obedience can be right or wrong, depending on why a person does the act.

We must recognize, however, that the line between right and wrong motives is not the same as that between private and public obedience. Not all public acts of obedience are done for the wrong motives. Jesus has already commanded us, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father who is in heaven” (5:16). We are actually commanded to perform righteous acts of obedience before others. The difference is in whom others see as a result of our public righteousness. Do they see only us, or do they see our Father more clearly?

Some Christians have the mistaken notion that if their acts of righteousness become known, they will receive no reward in heaven for those deeds. We must seek a balance. We must relax in faith in a God who searches our hearts and is willing to reveal and to purify our hearts (Ps. 139:23–24; 1 John 1:7, 9).

6:2–4. The opening when implies that this was a teaching which applied to any instance of giving. Jesus began by telling his hearers not to give alms, ascribing such ostentatious behavior to the hypocrites (referring to the scribes and Pharisees of 5:20). Key to the passage is the explanation of their motive: to be honored by men. In this first example, Matthew uses a verb meaning praise (5:16), whereas in the second and third examples, he uses another verb

¹ Kenneth O. Gangel, *John*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

meaning “to make visible” (active), “to be seen” (passive). The meanings of the words overlap, but the concern is the tendency toward competition with God for glory.

“Giving” or “almsgiving” is the translation of terms meaning “perform an act of mercy.” By the first century, the phrase came to mean specifically the act of giving to the needy. This kind of giving was not mandatory in Scripture, for it was above and beyond the three required tithes. The specific historical meaning of trumpets is unclear, but the intended point is clear: God’s people are not to give to draw attention to themselves. The observation of this principle would change the face of much of Christian ministry in our day!

In classical Greek, the term hypocrite referred to an actor on stage, wearing a mask. In the New Testament, it came to have a negative connotation, referring to someone putting on an act (i.e., masking the truth). We find the foundational point in Isaiah 29:13, quoted in Matthew 15:8, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Genuine righteousness is a matter of belief in the heart (Rom. 10:10).

As we saw in 5:18, 26, the introductory phrase, I tell you the truth (found thirty-two times in Matthew), prepares the listener for a statement of great importance. In this case, it is a statement intended to shock the listener. Jewish rabbis taught that almsgiving received especially high reward. How empty to know that, due to one’s own pride, there was no reward remaining for an act of righteousness beyond the glory of the moment. This was shocking to a first-century Jewish audience.

Verse 3 begins with the strong adversative, So when you. The emphasis on “you” was intended to draw a stark contrast between the hypocrites just described and Jesus’ kingdom servants, the disciples of 5:1–2. Jesus’ instruction in 6:3 is exaggerated wording intended to make the point: “Do all you can to avoid drawing attention to yourself.”

Since nothing escapes the eye of God, even the most private act is noticed and will be rewarded. Jesus’ use of the title Father added warmth to his guarantee of reward. This is not to be seen as a mechanical kind of relationship. Rather, the gift from the heart is given out of love for the Father, and the reward is returned as to a dearly beloved Son.

The reward (6:4, 6, 18) is not unrelated to the concept of reward in 6:1. The first word leans more toward the idea of repayment; thus, the idea of reimbursement for our “expense” incurred in each act of righteousness. But the point is the Father rewarding his servants. We were “created ... to do good works” (Eph. 2:10). In keeping with the instruction of 5:16 to “let your light shine,” our Father in heaven will reward us for good works. The issue for the Pharisees was works apart from God’s righteousness. The Pharisees were trying to establish their own righteousness by works.

6:5–6. Many of the comments in the preceding section on giving also apply to 6:5–6 on praying. Love in 6:5 is a word used also of the Pharisees in 23:6. Standing is from a verb implying the practice of taking a position and keeping it for a long time. And street is not just any street, but

a wide street, implying one heavily traveled, thus a street where the most people would see a person praying. Again the emphatic you at the beginning of 6:6 separates the kingdom servant from the crowd of hypocrites.

Jesus was certainly not forbidding public prayer (see 14:19; 15:36; Acts 1:24; 3:1; 4:24–30). But it may be said that the person who prays only in public and never in private is praying for the wrong reasons.

6:7–8. It is ironic that this prohibition against meaningless repetition is issued immediately before the Lord's Prayer. This passage is, without doubt, the most-often-repeated-without-meaning passage in the Bible. Of course, this is actually the Disciples' Prayer as the Lord never prayed for forgiveness of his sin. He was teaching his disciples how to pray.

The first-century Greeks and Romans believed in a pantheon of gods, all of whom had their faults; each of whom controlled some aspect of nature. They attempted to appease as many of these gods as possible, to receive their blessing and to avoid their wrath. Because these gods were so much like humans, the pagan worshiper believed he needed to pray repetitively to get their attention. Once a worshiper got a god's attention, he continued to pray repetitively to ensure that he was heard correctly and to convince the god that his request was worth granting.

Worshippers of these pagan gods also believed that the words they used carried some kind of magical power. Thus, the more often these words were used, the more powerful the magic. It is possible that some well-meaning modern believers may fall into this same trap—as though repeating certain “power words” somehow induces the Lord to act in their behalf. Prayer is not for the purpose of informing God. Rather, prayer expresses to him (and to ourselves) the fact of our impotence to meet our own needs. Biblical prayer is an act of faith, an expression of dependence on God. Meaningless repetition signifies dependence on oneself to manipulate or badger God into compliance.

When are believers guilty of meaningless repetition? For example, we add “in Jesus' name” as a mere punctuation mark at the end of our prayers. Would not it be better actually to pray in Jesus' name (with his authority, according to his will), instead of merely adding the phrase? We can pray in Jesus' name without using those words.

When we pray over meals or with our children at bedtime, do we really think about what we are saying? When we sing the words of a song of worship to the Lord, do we really mean them? 6:9–15. An important point to be made about the “Lord's Prayer” is that Jesus intended it to be a pattern for the servant of his kingdom, just as he intended much of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. It is not a magical formula. The specific words he used are not any more sacred than requests we might make expressing the same kinds of desires to the Father. We should seek to learn how to pray like Jesus prayed, not merely what Jesus prayed. That was his point when he said, This, then, is how you should pray (6:9). The pattern of meaningful prayer is to

begin by majoring on the person and nature of God and his kingdom interests, coming to personal requests and needs only secondarily.

You in Jesus' introduction (6:9a) is grammatically unnecessary, and is therefore emphatic. It is also placed at the end of the sentence for emphasis. His implication is, "You, on the other hand (in contrast to both the pompous hypocrites and the thoughtless, superstitious Gentiles), are to pray simply and meaningfully, as follows."

Our Father in heaven. The plural pronoun our indicates that prayer should be an expression of corporate desires to God, and should often be prayed in fellowship with other believers. The words Father and heaven together demonstrate the loving closeness and awesome transcendence of God to his child.

Hallowed be your name. The verb hallowed means "to sanctify, make holy." Because the grammatic form here is unknown in English, we tend to take this line in Jesus' prayer as a statement of fact, when, in fact, it is a request. Jesus was teaching us to make the request, "Lord, may your name be sanctified." Why should we pray to God that he would sanctify his own name? Probably as a reminder to ourselves to live a life that advertises a holy God. Also, this kind of greeting was a form of blessing on the one addressed.

In both Old and New Testament thinking, a person's name was equivalent to his or her very person (thus the careful choice in those days of children's names for their meaning, not just their sound). For this reason, it is not important to know what name of God Jesus may have meant. To say that the word by which God is called is to be holy falls far short of Jesus' meaning. Jesus was asking that God himself be set apart as holy, and so Jesus also modeled the attitude we should have toward God during prayer.

Hallowed has to do with something or someone being different or set apart. We must come before God with an attitude of reverence for God's perfection (in contrast to our imperfection), his wisdom (in contrast to our foolishness), his power (in contrast to our impotence), and his love (in contrast to our selfishness). God's holiness is everything that sets him apart from us and all the rest of his creation. Addressing such a being should never be done casually or flippantly.

Your kingdom come. The kingdom servant sees God's kingdom as not yet completely fulfilled on earth. This prayer is not only for the future coming of Christ (although this can be included), but it is also for the spreading of God's kingdom around the world through his kingdom servants. Therefore, it is a prayer that we, his servants, would be faithfully obedient and effective in living his kingdom principles in our own lives and then spreading the kingdom through our actions and words.

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. This request assumes that God's will is done in heaven, but not yet on earth (in the same full way). Sin and rebellion are absent in heaven, but hindrances are present on earth. This is another request for the spreading of God's kingdom rule on earth, primarily through the church as the agent of the kingdom. Our prayers are to be

continual reminders to ourselves to “get with” the kingdom program. Sadly, too many believers live for the weekends and not for Christ’s kingdom.

Give us today our daily bread. This petition is probably best taken at face value—as a request for the food needed daily, and that it be provided when it is needed. Most of the people in Jesus’ day lived hand-to-mouth. This was true particularly among the lower classes to whom Jesus’ message appealed most. This request acknowledges God as the provider of every physical need, but it also reminds the petitioner to trust God to provide as the needs arise, and not necessarily in advance. Compare this with the lesson Israel had to learn during forty years of daily manna; any excess spoiled by the second day. They were always just one day away from starvation, and yet they ate well during all those decades.

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. The Greek word for debts in the New Testament appears only here and Romans 4:4. It is clear that Jesus and Matthew intended the word to mean “sins” here (Luke 11:4). The choice of this word reflects the fact that all sins place us in debt to God. In a more extended treatment and parable on this same concept in 18:21–35, Jesus used the idea of debt to teach about sin and forgiveness.

This is the only petition that seems to have a condition prerequisite to its fulfillment and two full verses of explanation following (6:14–15). The context is the relationship of a child to a father. This is “family forgiveness,” not forensic or judicial forgiveness. Jesus is not saying that our forgiving is a necessary means to earning God’s forgiveness. The Bible makes it clear that there is nothing we can do to merit God’s judicial forgiveness, but that it is given freely (e.g., Rom. 5:6–8; Eph. 2:8–9).

One does not gain forgiveness by forgiving. But a person evidences his or her own forgiveness by forgiving others. Since this is family forgiveness, our sense of forgiveness is denied us when we deny forgiveness to others. As God’s children, we are commanded to be forgiving. When we fail to forgive, we reap the consequences of spiritual and moral defeat.

6:14–15. These verses further exhort the kingdom servant concerning the necessity of forgiveness in human relationships if we expect God’s forgiveness. These verses, and 18:21–35, explain 6:12. Receiving God’s forgiveness motivates forgiveness toward others.

Jesus expects us to replace this specific petition with more personalized requests for forgiveness for the specific sins in our own lives. No “meaningless repetition” here. Jesus’ intention might be better reflected if our Bibles printed his words of petition followed by a large white space, leaving room for us to “fill in the blanks” with our own personal sins. The petitions as he has given them guide us to the important themes for prayer, but he expects us to personalize these principles in our own lives.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. If the preceding request for forgiveness is curative spiritual medicine, then this request is the preventative medicine. Forgiveness is required to deal with guilt already incurred. Deliverance from temptation and

evil is required to prevent our incurring future guilt. The kingdom servant's petition for both forgiveness and deliverance is a prayer dealing with the power of sin (1 John 1:7–9); both look forward to the day when we will escape the presence of sin.

The kingdom servant who matures and grows in purity and obedience should rely less and less on the prayer for forgiveness and more and more on the prayer for protection. In this life, the kingdom servant will have need for ongoing forgiveness, but the many lessons learned will help in avoiding the traps of temptation in later life. Believers must never let down their guard. We find many exhortations in the New Testament to stay awake and watchful (e.g., Matt. 24:42; 25:13; 26:41).

We will follow the Lord's example in prayer if we pray regularly for specific spiritual dangers of which we are aware. Perhaps there is a particular area of temptation to avoid, or a particular person who is a stumbling block, or a trial looming in our future. God is interested in the details, and we will recognize his answers more clearly if we have made specific requests.²

² Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).