



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew – TRANSCRIPT

“Alms, Prayer and Fasting for the Glory of Men,” Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18

Will you listen, now, as I read from Matthew chapter 6 for the Scripture reading this morning? Matthew chapter 6. We are beginning the 6th chapter in our exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, and we’re going to read verse 1 through 8, then verses 16 through 18, saving the exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for our next meeting, next week the Lord willing. Perhaps we will take two times on that important section. But there are three subjects that come before the Lord here. They are the subjects of alms giving, or giving; prayer; and fasting. Verse 1 reads,

“Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee...”

(In the Authorized version, the King James version, some of you have in three places, “Shall reward thee openly.” That adverb, openly, is not found in the more ancient manuscripts, and so I will not read it in the other passages.)

“And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are:
for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners
of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you,
They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy
room, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is
in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.
But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the pagans do: for they
think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye
therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have
need of, before ye ask him.”

We turn now to the 16th verse,

“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.
Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou
fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto
men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, who
seeth in secret, shall reward thee.”

May God bless this reading of his word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Our heavenly Father, we come to Thee in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We thank Thee for the privilege of access into the presence of God. We’re grateful for the blood that was shed which has opened this way to Thy presence.

And we thank Thee that having come into Thy presence, we’re able to bring our petitions to the throne of this universe. We rejoice, Lord, that Thou hast brought us to this relationship, and that all true believers are priests of God and sons of God.

And so, Lord, we come as a body of priests, and as a body of sons and children with our petitions. We pray Thy blessing upon the ministry of the word, here, not only today in all of the meetings, including tonight, but also in the days that are ahead that Thou dost give us.

We pray, too, Thy blessing upon all who are ministering the word. Not only those who are ministering in Believers Chapel, but others in evangelical churches of this city and this state and this country. And in fact, Lord, wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in truth, we pray that Thou wilt bless to the end that the whole body of Jesus Christ, to which we are apart, may be blessed. We pray, that if it will please Thee, Thou wilt enlarge that body and increase it in number, edify it and build it up in spiritual maturity. Wilt Thou work in our midst in that way, too.

We pray for our country and for its leadership. O God, we pray that we each may be reminded again of the things that have made this country great, and of the things that have been a deterrent to that. And enable us as Christians to be good citizens of our country. We pray that we may stand for that which is right, that which is according to Thy truth, and that we shall be bold in our stand.

We pray that our relationship to our families may please Thee, and that in the family each of us may have our own particular role, and that we may carry it out to the glory of Jesus Christ.

We especially, Lord, remember those who are in the hospital now, and we think specifically of some. We pray that Thou wilt minister to them, and strengthen, and restore

to health as Thou dost will. And we pray for some who are going into the hospital – some tomorrow – we pray, O God, that Thou wilt minister to them, that Thou wilt strengthen and encourage and quieten nerves, that Thou wilt give doctors wisdom and skill as they diagnose and deal with their patients.

We would pray, Lord, for the many physicians who are members of Believers Chapel. We ask that Thou wilt give them the skills and the dedication, not only to our Lord Jesus but to their work, that will bring glory to our Lord whose they are, and who they serve, ultimately.

We praise Thee for the relationship that we enjoy, and now as we look forward to the ministry of the word, may Thy blessing rest upon us to the glory of Christ. It’s in his name that we pray. Amen.

[Message] The subject for this morning as we continue our exposition of the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew is “Alms Giving, Prayer and Fasting for the Glory of Men.” The religious habits of the Jews revolved around three practices. The practice of alms giving, the practice of fasting, and the practice of prayer, and I think this is reflected for us very clearly in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, which the Lord Jesus has told in the 18th chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

He said that two men went up into the Temple for prayer, the one Pharisee, and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, “God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast (notice the word, fast) twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.” So in this little incident that the Lord Jesus refers to, we have all three of these religious habits referred to: praying, fasting, giving.

What is striking about this is the fact that the Mosaic law did not demand these things of the Pharisees. In the Mosaic law, for example, nothing is said regarding fixed times for prayer, but the Pharisees and other Jewish people were particularly known for their times of prayer. In the law of Moses, but one is made to the practice of fasting. On

the Day of Atonement, the children of Israel were to afflict themselves and fast in token of mourning over sin and repentance for it. And that was once a year. And when we come to giving, there is no indication in the law of Moses that men were to give tithes of all that they possessed. So we have reference here to there practices of the Hebrew people in the time of our Lord in which we have our Lord’s critical comment upon them.

I am sure the Lord Jesus would not have disputed the cardinal significance of any one of these practices. It is evident from the study of the Scriptures that fasting is perfectly proper. As a matter of fact, fasting is proper in the present age. We have instances in which the apostles mention it, and in which the apostles engaged in it. Giving, of course, has some parts of the New Testament devoted to it, and giving was something that the ancient believers were also engaged in. And for, as far as prayer is concerned, we have many, many exhortations to pray.

But unfortunately, these three things which are of a cardinal significance, and which our Lord would surely have approved, are things that easily lend themselves to wrong motives. Men may pray, but they also may pray ostentatiously. They may pray lengthily. They may pray in order that other men may hear their prayers. You often, when you listen to prayers, get the impression that some people are trying to give you a system of theology in miniature while they are praying, and that it is really more directed toward people than God, who is has a fairly good grasp of theology himself. [Laughter]

And then, of course, it is possible for us to fast for praise of men. We like to be known as spiritual. Now, of course, our particular foibles may be different but, nevertheless, in those days these were prominent religious exercises, and they easily lent themselves to these wrong motives. And giving also could be for show.

O the subtlety of sin, that sin is able to take the finest of activities and use them as an expression of rebellion against God.

There is another theme that the Lord Jesus brings before us here, and it is the theme of Christian rewards. In fact, Christian rewards pervade the section, because three

times over, the term reward is mentioned in the section that I have read. The subject of Christian reward has been the object of a number of common criticism – generally by unbelievers – but nevertheless, occasionally, some of the believers have been affected by this criticism. It is said, for example, one ought to be good for good’s sake, and not for rewards. Virtue is its own reward.

Now that’s a noble thought, and I think in the eyes of many [indistinct] thought, but it was not an opinion of Jesus Christ. He did not believe that men should be good for good’s sake only, or that virtue is its own reward. The Lord Jesus spoke not only about rewards here, but if you will look up the word “reward” in your concordance, you will discover that in the Gospel of Matthew, there are several other references to it in this one, simple book. And in fact, we have already had one reference back in the 12th verse of the 5th chapter, “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so persecuted they the prophets who were before you.” So Christian rewards is a genuine Christian doctrine, and we ought to be able to answer this common criticism which appeals often to men, but which really doesn’t have any substance to it when it is analyzed.

You might expect the Lord Jesus, when dealing with subject like this, to lay down a principle, and he does lay down a principle. It’s found in the very first verse of the verses that we have read. Matthew writes in chapter 6 verse 1 giving the words of our Lord, “Take heed that ye do not your alms (or as the text says, your righteousness) before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise, you have no reward of your Father who is in heaven.” Now the key word here is the expression, “to be seen by them;” take heed that ye do not your alms before men to be seen by them. So, the point of our Lord is that the spiritual activities that we do are spiritual activities that are to be done before God, not by men. They are not to be done with the purpose that men may see them.

Many Christians think that they are the appointed fruit-testers for other Christian’s lives, and they like to think that it’s their responsibility to evaluate the life and ministry of

other Christians. And so, they have appointed themselves as official fruit-testers, to see that their Christian friends really measure up to God’s standard. And they often are very free to give us their evaluation.

Now, as far as Scripture is concerned, the appointed tester of the fruit and products of the lives of Christians is God himself. We all stand or fall before our master, not before our fellow Christians. Now I should modify that a little bit. The Lord Jesus did say, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” We have a right to look at the evidences of men’s lives, and we have a right to be warned by what we see. We have to observe our Lord’s words to cast not our pearls before swine, so we have some observations, but we should always remember that ours are only tentative and are not the observations of God.

Now furthermore, the Scriptures have given us passages in which we are told that elders are appointed, and it is their responsibility as a body to have the oversight for the saints. But having said this, our Lord’s principle is the general principle. Our alms, our righteousnesses are to be done as unto the Lord and not unto men, and the ultimate reward, the ultimate evaluation is to come from God.

Now, I mentioned the doctrine of Christian rewards. What are Christian rewards? Well, I wish I could tell you, because I’m interested in knowing what rewards are. But unfortunately, because we are sinful beings and because we live in time, because all of us are the children of Adam, even though redeemed, we are unable to understand the true nature of Christian rewards, just as we cannot understand the true character of heaven. We know there is a heaven. We know there is a reward, and there are rewards, but we do not know the precise nature of them. We do not know our inheritance, for example, and in all the references to our inheritances in Scripture, we know, of course, that they are not material things such as things down here upon the earth. We know certain things about them only in the sense that they are not like things down here on the earth.

For example, we are told with reference to our inheritance that it is incorruptible, undefiled, and it does not fade away. Now, that does not tell us what it is. It tells us

what these things are not. They are not things like things down here upon the earth. So we can conclude, I think, that Christian rewards exist, but the precise character of them remains hidden from us, because we do not have the capacity at the present time to understand what they would be.

Why are they necessary? Well, if there is no goal in life that provides a gain, then the action that we do is in futility and meaningless. If what we do is not good for something, it’s good for nothing. And for that reason, there must be Christian reward. Absence of rewards and absence of punishment permits injustice to have the last word. What’s the good of being good, someone has said, if there’s no such thing as eternal punishment? And so the natural product of the life that pleases God in its consummation is Christian reward, just as the natural product of two people who come to know each other then come to love each, the natural product is—as I mentioned several Sundays ago—Christian marriage.

And so, Christian rewards are the activity in its consummation, and they are the natural thing which Christians should expect. We do labor with the incentive of Christian reward. And we’ll have more to say about that later on, but enough for the present.

The Lord Jesus illustrates this principle that we must do our spiritual activities before God in three ways. He refers to giving, he refers to prayer, and he refers to fasting. First of all, he refers to giving.

Alms, or the giving of alms, was of great importance to the Jews. One of the most popular of the Apocryphal books, the Book of Tobith, has a statement in it that goes like this, “It is better to give alms than to treasure up gold, for alms-giving delivers from death and it will purge from every sin.” Now you can see from this two things. First, that alms-giving was regarded as being very good. But you can also see that the significance of it had become very misplaced, because giving, of course, is not a way of salvation. It will not purge from sin. It illustrates the fact that a good thing may be easily distorted and misconstrued. And these are the things that our Lord is trying to stress here.

Speaking of the negative side of things in verse 2, he says, “When you do your alms, when you give, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward.” Now what he is saying essentially is that when we give, we should not do it ostentatiously.

In the ancient Temple area, there was a court of the women, a court for the women. The women were not able to go into the court of the priests. And as a matter of fact, others were not able to go into the court of the priests, either. But in the court of the women, there were thirteen receptacles for the receiving of gifts. Now these receptacles were shaped like a trumpet, so that the top part of them looked like a trumpet. And they were made out of metal. So it was possible for a person, if he tossed his coin in a particular way, to make quite a racket in giving. And it was the custom of them to do that in order that people may realize that they were giving. And so if you could throw it in a certain way and make that noise, that came to be known as “sounding the trumpet – he sounded the trumpet by giving a coin.”

Now we don’t have any trumpets in Believers Chapel, of course. It would be very interesting to have some, I’m sure, but I don’t think our giving would increase at all. We probably would get a lot of giving that God did not bless. It’s easily possible, however, to do a similar thing when reaching into your pocket when the plate is passed. Did you give anything this morning when the plate was passed, incidentally? But, now, if the plate is passed, it’s easily possible to reach into your pocket and pull out a \$50 bill or a \$100 bill and do it with a flourish – you know [gestures; followed by laughter]. Now that would be sounding the trumpet.

Or it’s possible to be writing the check out, being careful to leave it open so that the fellow next door may get a good look at it and say, “My goodness, he gave \$5,000 this morning.” The Lord Jesus is speaking of this ostentatious giving. Now he says, verily, they have their reward.

In ancient times, they used an expression for the payment of a debt such as we do today. We have a stamp which says “paid,” and when you go into some place in which you owe money, and you pay the account, they may pull out a stamp and stamp it with “paid” and then they may initial it. That’s your receipt.

Well this word that is found here in several places, “they have their reward,” was the word that they have found in some of the ancient papyri for the receipting of bills. So what God is saying is this, that when you give ostentatiously, heaven, by virtue of the praise of men, has stamped upon your account “paid.” That is, you don’t have any reward in heaven. You’ve already gotten what you’ve paid for, and that’s the praise of men. So, in effect, when you do something ostentatiously, the Lord Jesus is saying, you’ve had it. You’ve had it. You’re not to have any reward in heaven; the reward that you get is the reward of the praise of men, for that is the motive by which you have given. So you have had it.

Therefore, the Lord goes on to say, “When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father who seeth in secret himself shall reward thee.” Christian-giving then, first of all, is to be private giving from a dedicated life, Paul says elsewhere. It is to be proportionate as the Lord has blessed us. It, of course, is to be sacrificial and also from gratitude for that which Jesus Christ has done. For the apostle, remember, in the midst of his great chapters on giving in 2 Corinthians he says, “Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift.” So, giving is from gratitude, and it is directed toward God. And all of our giving should follow that principle.

I have a good friend who became a Christian some years ago. She also had some friends, and she sought to share the gospel with them. One of them was a Roman Catholic friend. She shared the gospel with her friend, and her friend responded very negatively, and upbraided her a little bit for sharing her faith and speaking out in the conversation to the Lord Jesus. And then in order to support her rejection of the

testimony, and even the practice itself, she cited the 3rd verse of chapter 6, “Doesn’t the Bible say, ‘Let not your left hand know what your right hand doeth?’” It doesn’t have anything to do with Christian witnessing. It has to do with Christian giving.

Now, the second thing the Lord speaks about here is prayer. When you pray, of course, the Lord Jesus is not discouraging prayer. He is not telling us that we should not pray, he is talking again about the misconstruction of proper prayer. The Rabbis believed in prayer. The Old Testament is full of exhortations to prayer. One of the Rabbis has said, “Great is prayer, greater than all good works.” The faults of the Rabbis, the faults of the Jews, in fact, the faults of all the eastern people concerning which the Lord is speaking were the faults of a deluded misconstruction of the purpose and the practice of prayer. Prayers tended to become formalized and thus, they were dead, constantly repetitious and lengthy.

I don’t know whether you’ve had any experience of this or not, but I’ve had a great deal of experience of it. And even reading over this passage again has been somewhat convicting to me, because our prayers also tend to become somewhat formalized and the same phrases are repeated over and over again.

I’d like to say this, because after I finished this morning, someone came up to me and said, “How can I constantly be thankful to God for what Jesus Christ has done without being repetitious? Well know, the Lord Jesus has said, “vain repetitions.” So we must remember that. He’s not speaking about repeating requests that are repeated in genuineness and sincerity. He’s speaking about vain repetition.

But I have noticed, in the giving of thanks around the table, my prayers have often tended to fall into a pattern, and I can even say the blessing at table and continue thinking about something else. I’ve found it possible to say the blessing and hear what Walter Cronkite is saying on Channel 4 at the same time [laughter]. It doesn’t require any skill at all, I’ve discovered.

But what really upset me was when I discovered that people in my family began to say the same prayer that I was saying, and then I realized that I had fallen into a pattern of saying the same thing. Now, of course, we have to say some of the same things, but prayers are to be real.

The Jews were especially prone to this, as the Mohammedans, and as Christians as well. The Jews had the *Shema Yisrael*: three short portions of Scripture. The characteristic text was, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.” But there were other parts of that petition. They repeated the *Shema Yisrael* twice a day: at 9 o’clock in the morning, and then at 6 o’clock at night. They also had another prayer called the *Shemona Esrei*: eighteen prayers or petitions. And this was to be repeated three times: at 9 o’clock in the morning, at 12 noon and at 3 in the afternoon.

The Mohammedans, as you know, pray about five times a day. And wherever the Mohammedans are, if you are in Mohammedan lands, you will hear the sound which will call everybody to prayer. So the voice of the muezzin calls them to prayer. There’s even the story of one Mohammedan, who was bent on the murder of an individual and in was in fast pursuit of him with his knife in his hand, the call for prayer came. He quickly stopped, fell down on his knees, pulled out his little prayer rug, sat on it, prayed his gaveled prayer, and then took his knife in hand and continued the fast pursuit of the person he intended to kill if he could catch.

Now this kind of prayer is the kind of prayer the Lord Jesus is referring to. He also refers to lengthy prayers. Rabbi Levi has said, “Whoever is long in prayer is heard.” I want to say, “By whom is he heard?”

I heard a story once of Mr. Moody who was preaching once in an evangelistic meeting, and someone was called on to pray who felt it necessary to inform everyone that he was fairly sound in his theology. And he prayed, and he prayed and he prayed, going over the whole of theology from prolegomena all the way through to eschatology. And finally, as Mr. Moody became more and more itchy and nervous and fidgety, and finally as

the fella launched into the beginnings of the doctrines of eschatology, he couldn’t stand it any longer, and he stood up to this great meeting and said, “While this brother catches up on his praying, we’ll sing hymn number so-and-so.” [Laughter]

This kind of lengthy praying, which is really ostentatious praying, is the thing that our Lord has in mind. Now prayer, he says, is to be in secret and it is to be without vain repetitions.

What does he say? In the 6th verse he says, “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy room.” The Authorized Version says “closet.” I have a very good friend, he’s a preacher in New Jersey, very fine preacher – he’s an elderly man now; he’s about my age. But he said, he told me once, “Lewis, for a long time after I was a Christian I took that literally. I prayed in my closet. I went into my bedroom, I opened up my closet, and I got in the corner of my closet in order to pray.” But then he discovered that the word here was really the word, room.

The thing our Lord is stressing is private prayer, and so he says we should enter into our rooms, and when we have shut the door, we should pray to our Father in secret, and our Father shall reward us. And when we pray, we should not do as the pagans do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Perhaps the greatest illustration of this is Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal.

And remember when they had finally made their altar, and they had laid their particular sacrifice upon it, the prophets of Baal began to call upon their god. From early in the morning until noon of the day, they called out. They only had one phrase, “O Baal, hear us, O Baal hear us, O Baal, hear us!” And they went around, as people usually did in those days, they engaged in all kinds of dances and other things which they thought might influence their god in heaven.

Elijah was a good old fella. I really love Elijah; I think he would have been right with it today, because when they continued for a length of time, he began to goad them on a little bit. He said, “Why perhaps your god’s not home. Perhaps he’s visiting

someone. Perhaps he’s out hunting, and so on.” And he just laughed at them as they continued until noon. And then, when they were through and nothing happened, Elijah prayed a little prayer. I read over that prayer about a week ago in preparation of the lesson, and I just read through it to see how long it would take me to pray that prayer—it took me twenty seconds to pray the prayer that Elijah prayed.

And he prayed that prayer and the fire of God came down from heaven and consumed Elijah’s sacrifice in token of the fact that his God was the true God. Brief, pointed prayers are the lesson the Lord wishes to give here. Don’t pray lengthily. Pray without vain repetitions. Pray in secret, and pray for God.

Now this introduces another problem, because does not verse 8 say, “For your Father knows what things ye have need of before you ask him”? Someone might say, why should we pray, then? God knows what we have need of before we ask it. And in fact, we might make this more of a theological problem by saying, “God knows what he’s going to do, also.” Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the age, and in Daniel chapter 4 and verse 35, we read, “And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing, and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay his had or say unto him, ‘What doest Thou?’” The facts are, my dear Christian friends, that prayer does not ultimately change things.

Now that may surprise you to hear me say that, and I know what you’re thinking: well, Dr. Johnson has gone off again on Calvinism. No, I’ve just gone off again on biblical theology. The truth of the matter is that God has in his decree determined what has come to pass. He works all things according to the counsel of his own will. But we do not know what these things are, and while he has determined the end, he has also determined the means to that end. And prayer is often the means to that end. Sometimes it is witnessing or sharing our faith is the means to that end, and we are encouraged in

the word of God to pray constantly, because it is an opportunity for us to have a share in what God is surely going to accomplish.

In fact, I have never understood why a person, in the light of that doctrine, should feel that he shouldn’t have to pray. This can be the greatest incentive for prayer that there could possibly be. I know that I can have a part in something that God is going to do. And furthermore, that says nothing about the fellowship that we enjoy in prayer with God. He has given us exhortations and invitations to pray, to enter into fellowship with him, and to have a part in what he is doing. But he is going to accomplish his will. We cannot frustrate God. Known unto him are all his works from the beginning of the age. He works all things according to the counsel of his own will. He does according to his will in the army of heaven, and also among the inhabitants of the earth. Your Father knows what things you have need of before you ask him, but he invites you to ask that you may enjoy fellowship with him.

Mr. Wesley and Mr. Whitefield were two illustrations of men who had different theologies. George Whitefield was a Calvinist. John Wesley was an Arminian. They loved each other. As a matter of fact, the great work which Mr. Wesley did was something that Mr. Whitefield began and which Mr. Whitefield turned over to Mr. Wesley in order that he, the Calvinist, may come out to the United States as a missionary to preach the gospel here.

Well, they had meetings together. One time they were together and when the day of hard work was over, they went to the boarding house, they went to the same room, and one was in one bed and one the other, and they were rather exhausted, and they prepared for their sleep, and each knelt by the side of the bed to pray. Mr. Whitefield prayed, “Lord, we thank Thee for all those with whom we spoke today, and we rejoice that their lives and destinies are entirely in Thy hand. Honor our efforts according to Thy perfect will, in Jesus’ name. Amen.” And he got up off his knees and got into bed.

And Mr. Wesley had just hardly gotten into his invocation by the time Mr. Whitefield was over, and he looked up when heard the movement and he said, “Mr. Whitefield, is this where your Calvinism leads you?” And then he continued praying.

Well two hours later, Mr. Whitefield awakened and looked over, and there was Mr. Wesley still by the side of the bed. But he noticed he wasn’t moving very much. So he got out of the bed, he went over, he punched him, and Mr. Wesley was asleep. And he said, “Mr. Wesley, is this where your Arminianism leads you?” [Laughter]

They were two men who loved the Lord, and they had fellowship as good Calvinists and good Arminians should. Someone once came to Mr. Whitefield who was a rather disagreeable kind of Calvinist. And he said, Mr. Whitefield, do you think that we shall see Mr. Wesley in heaven? And Mr. Whitefield said, “No, I don’t.” And the other brother was rather pleased by that, because he thought there was some question about Mr. Wesley’s salvation because he was an Arminian. But before he could rejoice in it too much, he said, “No, we won’t see him, because Mr. Wesley will be so close to the Lord that he will be in the glory of our Lord Jesus and so caught up in it, that where we’ll be standing, we probably won’t be able to see him.”

The important thing, my Christian friend, is to recognize that God is sovereign, and he does according to his will, and in his marvelous grace he invites us to participate in what he is doing through prayer. But our prayers are to be private, they are to be directed to him, they are to be without vain repetitions, they are to be brief and to the point, and he will honor those prayers and bring answers to them.

One final illustration I pass by without a great deal of comment for time’s sake. Prayer is the attaching of ourselves to God. Fasting is the detaching of ourselves from the earth. In the Old Testament, fasting was almost always connected with mourning over sin and repentance for it.

In the New Testament, this voluntary abstinence from material things has a broader use. It seems to me from the New Testament teaching, that it is proper for a

Christian to fast when he wishes to find the will of God. The Apostle Paul fasted, they fasted in Antioch, in the church there, and it was not long before the Holy Spirit separated Paul and Barnabas for a great work which they were to do in their evangelistic ministry. So fasting is a perfectly proper Christian activity.

The Lord’s answer for the fasters might seem to be contradictory. In effect, he says, be a hypocrite. He says when you fast, don’t be like those who fast to be seen of men. They disfigure their faces that they may appear unto men to fast. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, wash your face, in order that you do not appear to me to be fasting. Now the reason he is saying that is so that you might not be doing that ostentatiously.

G. Campbell Morgan has said, “O my life, thou shouldest keep perpetual limp within the secret chamber of thy being, and everlasting Easter upon thy face.” True Christianity is an inward matter. It is something that we do before God, and we should avoid all of these outward things that tend to legalism and tend also to ostentatious exhibitions of piety which do not have reward according to God.

Now may I close with just a word or so? There are three refrains in this passage. There is first the word, secret. It occurs three times, in verse 4, in verse 6, and verse 18. That should describe our piety: secret, private, private praying, private fasting, private fasting. That means, to be very practical with you, if you determined this week that you want to know the will of God on some point, and you decide that you’re going to find it, don’t call Mrs. Ray, the church secretary, and have it put in the Calendar of Concern.

Then the second word is the word, hypocrites. This also occurs three times: verse 2, verse 5, verse 16. And we have numerous passages in the New Testament in which the apostles in their writings speak about hypocrisy. Peter tells to lay aside all hypocrisies. Oh, how easy it is for us to be hypocritical in our Christian activities, to give the impression that we are very spiritual, to seek to communicate that to others, when before God the thing that pleases is the earnest dedication of the inward man to the doing

of the will of God, waiting for our reward which will come at the judgment seat of Jesus Christ.

And finally, there is the word, reward, itself. That also occurs three times: verse 4, verse 6 and verse 18. Isn’t it an amazing thing that the response of our great, glorious God to the work we do is a reward? Because when we look in Scripture and study Scripture, we discover that it is in the final analysis not we who have done the work, it is God who has done the work through us. And yet, out of his gracious goodness, he gives us a reward for work that he does through us. Now I call that grace. What tremendous motivation there is for the service of God.

There is a story which I think has very definite application to what I have been saying. It has to do with Reuben Archer Torrey. A woman once came up to him and said, “Mr. Torrey, I’ve tried the promises of the Bible and found them untrue.”

He said, “What promises have you found untrue?”

She says, “Why, the promise that says whatever things you desire when you pray, believe that ye shall receive them, and ye shall have them. Once I prayed for something very earnestly, and I didn’t receive it. Isn’t it true that this promise has failed?”

Mr. Torrey said, “No, not at all.”

“But doesn’t it say that you shall receive whatever you ask for if you believe it?”

Mr. Torrey agreed and said, “It’s something like that, although the will of God is involved in it.” But he said, “First of all you have to ask yourself if you are one of the ye’s.” And then he said, “You see, these promises are for believers.”

And so when we read in Scripture here when ye pray or when ye fast or when ye do alms, that’s a separation of the believers from the unbelievers. And these great texts of Scripture have to do with those who have truly believed. So I ask you, are you one of the “ye’s?” Have you truly believed in Jesus Christ? Do you know the gospel that Christ died for sinners? Has the Holy Spirit brought home to you that you are a sinner, and have you

in your inmost being before God thanked him for the gift of life through Christ? May God, through his Spirit, draw you to himself. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] We are thankful to Thee, Lord, for the privilege of the study of the word of God, and we thank Thee for these probing, revealing, convicting words from our Lord Jesus.

So often, Lord, we have done our righteousnesses in order to be seen of men. O God, deliver us from the hypocrisy that characterizes our lives. And enable us by Thy grace to love Thee purely and privately to the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

And now may grace, mercy and peace go with the saints. And O Father, if there be someone here who has not come to Christ, O give them no rest nor peace until they rest in him who died for sinners.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.