Matthew 6: Before the Father

Key Verse

> *"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided to you."*
> *— Matthew 6:33*

Big Idea

Kingdom rightness is lived before the Father. Yeshua assumes His *talmidim* will practice their faith, but He challenges us to examine why we do what we do. Human applause can become its own reward, while the King calls us to seek the Father's approval, His Kingdom and His rightness above everything else.

Introduction

We are still on the mountain. Matthew 6 is not a new sermon or even a new subject. Yeshua continues teaching His *talmidim* what life under the rule of the King looks like.

At the end of Matthew 5, Yeshua took Torah beyond outward compliance and into the heart. Murder matters, but even anger matters as well. What we cultivate in our desires matters, not merely the physical act of adultery. Truthfulness, generosity, treatment of enemies and even our motives belong within Kingdom rightness.

Now Yeshua turns to practices that would have been familiar to the Jewish people listening to Him: giving, prayer and fasting. He does not criticize these practices. In fact, He assumes His *talmidim* will do them. "When you give..." "When you pray..." "When you fast..." The question is not whether we will practice our rightness. The question is why we are doing it and who we hope is watching.

That connects directly with something Yeshua has already said. In Matthew 5:16 He told His followers to let their light shine before people so that they would see their good works and glorify the Father. Now He warns against practicing our righteousness before people "to be noticed by them" (6:1). The works may look the same. The difference is where the glory lands.

If I am aiming for human applause, I may get it. People may admire my generosity, my prayers or my spirituality. But Yeshua says that is all I will get. "They have their reward in full." The applause was the reward I wanted, and the account has been settled.

Matthew 6 therefore takes us further into the heart. Yeshua will speak about giving, prayer, fasting, money, possessions and worry. They may sound like separate subjects, but they are connected by a common question: What has my heart?

Yeshua teaches His *talmidim* to live before the Father rather than for the approval of other people. Giving, prayer and fasting are expected parts of Kingdom life, but they can easily become performances when human recognition becomes the goal.

He teaches His disciples how to pray, beginning not with our needs but with our Father, His name, His Kingdom and His will. He then turns to treasure and possessions, because what we value reveals where our heart is. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (6:21).

Finally, Yeshua addresses worry. The Father who sees in secret is also the Father who knows what His children need. Kingdom people therefore seek first His Kingdom and His rightness, trusting Him with tomorrow while faithfully living today.

Opening Prayer

Father, You see what other people cannot see. You know not only what I do, but why I do it. Show me where I am seeking the approval of others rather than Yours. Teach me to give without needing recognition, to pray because I want to be with You, and to seek Your Kingdom before my own security and comfort. Help me to trust You with what I need today and with the things I cannot control about tomorrow. Let my rightness grow out of a genuine relationship with You rather than a desire to be noticed by others. Amen.

Commentary

Practicing Your Rightness

Matthew 6:1

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be noticed by them” (6:1). This verse provides something of a heading for what follows. Yeshua is about to speak about certain specific aspects of religion: giving, prayer and fasting, and all three can be seen by other people. His warning is not against practicing rightness. Quite the opposite: He assumes that His followers will practice it.

The problem is found in the little phrase “in order to be noticed by them.” Motive matters. Two people may perform the same generous act. One gives because someone is in need and because generosity reflects the character of God. The other gives because he wants people to notice what a generous person he is. From the outside, we may not be able to tell the difference. The Father can.

That is why Matthew 5:16 and Matthew 6:1 belong together. “Let your light shine before people in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” Yeshua does not want invisible disciples. He expects rightness to become visible in the way we live. But in Matthew 5 the works are visible, and the Father receives the glory. In Matthew 6 the works are visible because I want the glory.

Yeshua then gives the warning: “otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven” (6:1). That theme of reward will run through the next three examples. The question is not whether there will be a reward. The question is whose reward I am seeking.

When You Give

Matthew 6:2–4

“So, when you give to the poor…” (6:2). Notice the word “when.” Yeshua does not say, “If you ever decide to give.” Giving to those in need was already embedded deeply in Jewish life and Torah. Care for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger was not an optional extra for

particularly generous Israelites. Yeshua assumes that Kingdom people will continue to be generous.

The issue is what happens when generosity becomes theatre. Yeshua describes people who “sound a trumpet” before them so that their giving will be noticed. Whether He is describing an actual practice or using one of His wonderfully exaggerated pictures, the point is hard to miss: don't advertise your generosity to advertise yourself.

And then comes that phrase: “Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full” (6:2). The language carries the sense of an account that has been paid and closed. If applause is what I wanted, and people applauded, I received my payment. There is no outstanding balance.

That is sobering because generosity can be real and the motive can still be wrong. The person in need may genuinely benefit from my gift. Other people may quite reasonably think I have done something good. But the Father sees another part of the transaction. He sees why I did it. Yeshua says, “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (6:3). Obviously, He is not asking us to develop two independent brains for our hands. The exaggeration makes the point. Give so freely and so naturally that you do not need to keep a record of your own goodness.

There will be times when generosity is necessarily public. The issue is not secrecy for secrecy's sake. The issue is whether I need an audience. “Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you” (6:4).

The audience of One is enough.

When You Pray

Matthew 6:5–8

“When you pray...” (6:5). Once more, notice the assumption. Yeshua does not say, “If you pray.” Prayer is expected in the life of His *talmidim*, just as giving is expected. The issue is not whether we pray, but why we pray and whose attention we are seeking.

Yeshua warns against being like the hypocrites who love to pray in the synagogues and on street corners “so that they will be seen by people” (6:5). We should be careful here. Yeshua is not criticizing synagogue prayer or public prayer. Jewish life included both, and Yeshua Himself prayed in the presence of others. The problem is contained in that same phrase: “so that they will be seen.”

Prayer can become performance.

The Greek word translated “hypocrite” came from the idea of an actor, someone playing a role often with two faces. That makes Yeshua's choice of language especially vivid. I can sound spiritual, choose impressive words, adopt the appropriate posture and appear deeply devoted to God, while performing for the people who are listening.

And once more Yeshua says, “They have their reward in full” (6:5). If I prayed so that people would think well of me, and they did, then I received exactly what I wanted. The applause of the audience was my reward.

“But as for you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret” (6:6). This is not a prohibition against praying with other people. It is an invitation to have a life with God that does not depend upon other people knowing about it.

There is something wonderfully intimate in Yeshua's repeated language: “your Father.” Prayer is not primarily a speech delivered to heaven. It is conversation within a relationship. The Father sees in secret. He does not need to be impressed by our vocabulary, and we do not need another human being in the room to make the prayer worthwhile.

Every public prayer ought to have somewhere behind it a private life with God.

Life Application

There is a simple test here. Would I still pray this way if nobody else could hear me? Public prayer can subtly tempt us to speak sideways. We are supposedly talking to God, but part of us may be thinking about what the people listening will think of what we are saying. Yeshua takes us back into the room, shuts the door and reminds us of who the conversation is with.

Many Words Don't Make a Better Prayer

Matthew 6:7–8

“And when you are praying, do not use thoughtless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words” (6:7). Yeshua is not condemning repetition itself. Jewish prayer contains repeated words and phrases. The Psalms do as well. Yeshua Himself will repeat the same prayer in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:44). Other versions of the Bible use the adjective “vain” or “meaningless” for “thoughtless.” The Greek word can translate to “babble or prattle.”

The problem Yeshua is addressing is the notion that enough words will somehow make God listen. In the pagan world, prayer could involve formulas designed to gain the attention or favor of a deity. Say enough, say it correctly, repeat it sufficiently, and perhaps the god will respond.

Yeshua's understanding of prayer is entirely different because His understanding of God is different: “Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (6:8). Then why pray? Not because God needs information. Prayer does not bring the Father up to date. Nor do we pray because He is reluctant and needs persuading. We pray because He is our Father and He has invited us into relationship with Him.

How Then Should We Pray?

Matthew 6:9–13

“Pray, then, in this way” (6:9). What follows is usually called the Lord's Prayer. There is nothing wrong with that name, but it is perhaps more accurately the disciples' prayer. Yeshua is teaching His *talmidim* how to pray.

And it is thoroughly Jewish.

“Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name.” Jewish listeners would immediately recognize the concern for the sanctification of God's name. The *Kaddish*, familiar in Jewish worship, begins with the desire that God's great name be magnified and sanctified. Yeshua begins

in similar territory. Before asking for bread, forgiveness or protection, the disciple looks toward God and His honor.

“Hallowed be Your name” does not mean that we make God's name holy. It already is holy. We are praying that His name will be recognized and treated as holy—in our world and certainly in our own lives.

“Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (6:10). We have been talking about the Kingdom since Matthew 3. John announced it. Yeshua announced it. The Sermon on the Mount describes its people and its rightness. Now Yeshua teaches us to pray for God's Kingdom to come.

There is something challenging about praying, “Your will be done.” I am not merely asking God to bless my plans. I am surrendering my plans to His. Kingdom prayer begins with the King. Only then do we reach our needs: “Give us this day our daily bread” (6:11). The request is deliberately modest. Give us what we need for today. Israel's experience of manna in the wilderness comes readily to mind. They were given what they needed day by day and were required to trust God for tomorrow's provision when tomorrow came (Exodus 16).

Notice also the pronouns throughout this prayer. It is our Father. Give us our bread. Forgive us our debts. Lead us. Deliver us. Even when I pray this prayer alone, Yeshua teaches me to pray as part of a community. Kingdom prayer is not merely about me and my needs, because the Kingdom is bigger than me--it’s about the King and His family.

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (6:12). Matthew uses the language of debts, an image that makes forgiveness wonderfully concrete. Something is owed. There is an account between us. Forgiveness releases the debt rather than spending the rest of our lives demanding payment.

“And do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from evil” (6:13). This is not suggesting that God tempts His children to sin. Scripture is clear that He does not (James 1:13). We are asking our Father to guide us through testing and protect us from the evil that would draw us away from Him.

The prayer is remarkably short. After warning His disciples not to imagine that many words make prayer more effective, Yeshua gives them a prayer that can be spoken in less than a minute. Yet in those few lines we have the Father's name, His Kingdom, His will, our daily needs, our relationships, our failures and our need for protection.

Forgiveness

Matthew 6:14–15

Of all the petitions in the prayer, Yeshua chooses only one to explain immediately afterward: forgiveness. That ought to get our attention. “For if you forgive other people for their offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive other people, then your Father will not forgive your offenses” (6:14–15).

Yeshua is not teaching us how to earn God's forgiveness. The whole prayer begins with “Our Father.” We are already approaching God relationally. But people who live by mercy cannot reasonably insist upon receiving mercy while refusing to extend it.

Forgiveness does not mean pretending that nothing happened. It does not automatically restore trust, and it does not require remaining in a dangerous or destructive relationship. Forgiveness acknowledges that there really is a debt—and chooses not to make collecting that debt the governing purpose of our lives.

That is difficult. Some debts are enormous. But the King who told us in Matthew 5 to love our enemies now teaches us to pray, “Forgive us... as we also have forgiven.” The two chapters belong together. Kingdom rightness reaches into our relationships, including the relationships that have wounded us most deeply.

When You Fast

Matthew 6:16–18

“And whenever you fast...” (6:16). For the third time the pattern appears. When you give. When you pray. When you fast. Yeshua assumes these practices will have a place in the lives of His followers.

Fasting was already familiar within Jewish life. In the Tanach it accompanies mourning, repentance, prayer and times of particular need before God (Joel 2:12; Esther 4:16; Ezra 8:21–23). Yeshua does not have to introduce fasting to His listeners. Instead, He addresses what happens when even self-denial becomes another opportunity for self-promotion.

The hypocrites make sure they look miserable. Their faces announce what their mouths may be too modest to say: “Look at me. I'm fasting.” Yeshua says, in effect, do the opposite. Wash your face. Fix yourself up. Get on with the day. The point is not to deceive people into thinking that you aren't fasting. The point is that they don't need to know.

Once more, the Father does. Giving, prayer and fasting are all good practices. Yeshua assumes them. But every one of them can be corrupted when the practice becomes a means of building my reputation. And every time Yeshua brings us back to the same audience: your Father who sees what is done in secret.

Treasures That Last

Matthew 6:19–21

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal” (6:19). Yeshua now moves from what we might call religious practices —giving, prayer and fasting—to our possessions. But He has not really changed the subject. He is still talking about the heart.

In Yeshua's world, wealth might be stored in expensive clothing, precious metals or other possessions. Clothing could be destroyed by moths. Other treasures could deteriorate or be stolen. Whatever form our treasure takes, earthly possessions have one thing in common: they do not last. “But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (6:20). Yeshua is not condemning possessions, savings or responsible planning. The question is what we treasure. What receives our energy, attention and affection? What do we believe will finally make us secure?

Then comes the sentence that explains the whole section: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (6:21). We might expect Yeshua to say that our treasure follows our heart. He

says it the other way around. Our heart follows our treasure. What we continually invest in can begin to shape what we love.

That makes the way we use money a spiritual issue. A bank statement may tell us something about our heart that our religious vocabulary does not.

The Good Eye

Matthew 6:22–23

“The eye is the lamp of the body” (6:22). At first this can sound like Yeshua has suddenly changed subjects. He has not. He is still speaking about possessions, generosity and what controls us.

The language of a “good eye” and an “evil eye” has Jewish resonance. A good eye could describe generosity, while an evil eye could describe stinginess, envy or greed. Proverbs says, “One who is generous will be blessed, because he gives some of his food to the poor” (Proverbs 22:9). The Hebrew for “One who is generous” literally translates to “A good eye.”

So, the verses about the eye sit quite naturally between treasure and Yeshua's warning about serving wealth. How I look at what I possess—and how I look at what someone else possesses—reveals something about me. If my eye is generous, there is light. If my eye is consumed with envy, greed and acquisition, darkness begins to shape the way I see everything.

Two Masters

Matthew 6:24

“No one can serve two masters” (6:24). Yeshua does not say that serving two masters is difficult. He says we cannot do it.

The word translated “wealth” or “mammon” refers to possessions or riches. Money itself is not presented as evil. The danger comes when something useful as a servant becomes our master. And masters demand allegiance. That is why Yeshua says we will ultimately love one and hate the other or be devoted to one and despise the other. Eventually competing loyalties force a decision. “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

This takes us back to the beginning of the chapter. Whose approval am I seeking? Who sees what I do in secret? What do I treasure? Who is my Master? These are not separate questions. They are different ways of asking who has my heart.

Life Application

Money is a particularly effective test because we can say that God comes first while our financial decisions tell another story.

The question is not simply, “How much money do I have?” Someone with very little can be controlled by money, and someone with considerable wealth can hold it generously. The better question may be: How tightly does money hold me?

Do Not Worry

Matthew 6:25–30

“For this reason, I say to you, do not be worried about your life” (6:25). “For this reason” matters. Yeshua connects worry with what He has just said about treasure and masters. If God is my

Master, I can trust Him with the things I need. Don't confuse Alfred E. Neuman with his "What, me worry?" thinking.

Unlike Neuman, Yeshua is not pretending that food, drink and clothing are unimportant. They are necessities. Nor is He telling His *talmidim* to stop working or planning. His concern is the anxiety that takes tomorrow's possibilities and makes them today's burden. And He is insisting that those in relationship with the King can be settled without worry that would otherwise cripple them or others.

"Look at the birds of the sky" (6:26). Birds do not sow fields, harvest crops or store grain in barns, yet the Father feeds them. Of course, birds are active. They search for food and build nests. Yeshua's point is not that they sit around doing nothing. They live without carrying tomorrow in the way human beings can.

Then He asks, "Are you not much more important than they?"

The argument uses a familiar Jewish interpretive principle, *kal v'chomer*—from the lesser to the greater—that we will continue to see in the Gospel. Basically, if something is true in a smaller circumstance, how much more will it be true in the larger one? Here, if the Father cares for birds, how much more can His children trust His care?

"And which of you by worrying can add a single day to his life's span?" (6:27). Worry feels productive because our minds are very busy. But mental activity and useful action are not the same thing. Worry cannot lengthen life. Yeshua then points to the flowers of the field. They do not labor or spin cloth, yet "not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these" (6:29).

The King has moved us outside. Look at the birds. Look at the flowers. Creation becomes a lesson in the Father's care. And it's kal v'chomer again. If God clothes grass that is here today and gone tomorrow, "will He not much more clothe you?" (6:30). The Father who attends to something as temporary as grass has not forgotten His children.

What Are We Chasing?

Matthew 6:31–33

"Do not worry then, saying, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink?' or 'What are we to wear for clothing?'" (6:31). These are legitimate needs. The problem is when legitimate needs become consuming pursuits.

Yeshua says, "For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things" (6:32). He is speaking to Jewish *talmidim*, so the contrast would have been immediately understood. But His point is not that Gentiles do not matter to God. Matthew has already made that impossible to maintain. The issue is living as though we do not have a Father.

"Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (6:32). That sentence echoes what Yeshua said about prayer: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (6:8). The Father knows.

Then comes one of the great summary statements of the chapter: "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided to you" (6:33). The contrast is between

what we chase. The nations chase security through food, clothing and possessions. Yeshua's *talmidim* are to chase something else first: God's Kingdom and God's rightness.

“First” does not mean that food and clothing cease to matter. It means they are no longer preeminent. The King rearranges our priorities.

Today's Trouble

Matthew 6:34

“So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (6:34).

I like the realism of that sentence. Yeshua does not say, “Don't worry, because tomorrow will have no trouble.” He says tomorrow has enough trouble of its own. We can spend today living through difficulties that have not happened yet. Some of them may happen. Many will not. Either way, worrying about tomorrow means we experience its imagined troubles before they arrive, while still carrying everything God has given us to do today.

Yeshua calls us back to today.

The old adage is “Yesterday is gone; tomorrow never comes. Today is a gift; that’s why we call it the ‘present’.”

The prayer earlier in the chapter asked for “daily bread.” Now the chapter ends with daily trust. God gives us today, and we live today before our Father. Tomorrow, when it becomes today, we will meet Him there too. This reminds me of the psalm still sung in churches and proclaimed with regularity in synagogue and even Passover seders.

Psalm 118 reads, “This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24). The Hebrew *hayom*, “the day,” can also carry the very immediate sense of “today.” This is today the LORD has made. I consider that each day of my life and have done so for decades. I live in today, not for today. I don’t have a devil-may-care attitude and follow Alfred E. Neuman. No, I follow King Messiah and trust Him today. Tomorrow has enough trouble of its own.

Takeaways

If human applause is what I seek, I may receive it, but Yeshua warns that I have then received my reward in full. The Father sees what happens in secret.

Kingdom life is never merely about me. It is about the King and His family.

Competing masters will eventually demand competing loyalties.

Kingdom rightness means living before the Father, seeking His approval, trusting His provision and allowing Him to determine what comes first each day.

Memory Verse

> *“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided to you.” — Matthew 6:33*

What's Next?

Matthew 7 brings the Sermon on the Mount to its conclusion. Yeshua will speak about judging others, asking and seeking, two roads, false prophets and two builders.

The sermon will end with a choice. Both builders hear the words of Yeshua. The difference is what they do with what they have heard.

Matthew 7 therefore leaves us with the question that the whole Sermon on the Mount has been moving toward:

What will I do with the words of the King?