

6. Hypocrisy and the Ethic of the Kingdom (6:1-18)

Up to this point in his treatment of the ethic of His kingdom, Jesus has shown repeatedly that the kingdom's righteousness transcends the natural human conception of righteousness as moral and behavioral rectitude. To the natural mind, righteousness is about conformity to accepted standards (whether those standards derive from personal, cultural, or religious sources). Righteousness is regarded as a *forensic* and *behavioral* concept rather than an *ontological* and *relational* one: In the Scripture, righteousness is concerned with "rightness" – that is, with the state of being in which a person exists in every aspect of his life in perfect conformity to his created nature and function.

- Righteousness is ontological in that it speaks to the demand of *authenticity*; a person is righteous when he exists in the integrity of an accurate self-understanding that manifests itself in a life consistent in every way with who he really is as a being created in the divine image and likeness.
- And because God created man as divine image-bearer unto the goal of his *sonship*, righteousness is preeminently relational. All sin is grounded in the reality of divine-human estrangement, and the implication – which is at the heart of the biblical message – is that the recovery of human righteousness begins with the abolition of the alienation/enmity between God and His image-bearer. Righteousness is *rightness*, and, for man, his rightness consists in his full and uncorrupted intimacy with his Creator-Father; human righteousness consists in a life of perfect love, first to God and then to the sons who bear His image.

Jesus' kingdom is the reality and realm of the new creation; it is the kingdom of renewal, reconciliation and restoration promised in Eden and now realized in the Last Adam who is the True Image-Son. This is the reason that Christ's presentation of the ethic of His kingdom focuses on the demand of love. The Israelite kingdom spoke of and portrayed this ethic, but it could go no further because it was a kingdom that existed under the curse; whatever its "righteous" practice under the Law, Israel was incorrigibly unrighteous because it remained estranged from its covenant Father. *Estrangement allows for and can even rejoice in and relentlessly pursue religious and moral rectitude; what it cannot embrace (or even rightly conceive) is the authentic human ethic of love.*

Estrangement at all levels and in every relationship defines the human condition; it is the "sea" in which human beings "swim" and the lens through which they perceive and interact with all of life. This is as true of the way they conceive and practice righteousness as the way they think of love. And like a pair of glasses that has been worn for many years, men's state of alienation and its impact on their perception and conception become virtually imperceptible to them. They don't *feel* estranged from God or other people; they don't *feel* as if they're self-enslaved, hopelessly alienated even from themselves. This blindness to true righteousness and its resultant self-righteousness are the reason men naturally view Jesus' treatment of righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount as reaffirming the human obligation of moral/religious uprightness. One need only examine the Church's writings to see that Christians are not exempt from this tendency.

Thus the natural mind contemplates Jesus' declaration, "*You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,*" and finds in it a demand suitable to its own estranged state: "perfection" that is the legal righteousness of faultless conformity to God's revealed commandments. And once a person embraces this flawed conception of righteousness, it really doesn't matter that he concedes that it isn't a personally attainable goal; the fact remains that he has missed the true nature of righteousness and so also Jesus' point.

- Jesus wasn't highlighting the need for God to "impute" a commodity called "righteousness" to a hopeless sinner's "account" any more than He was calling for a life of greater resolve and discipline in the personal pursuit of righteousness.
- He was proclaiming the necessity of human renewal – the need for men to have their humanity restored and be reconciled to God as true sons. The obligation of perfection is the obligation to "die" to false reality and human existence as we know them and have our lives be hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:1-4); righteousness is what men gain, not as a legal transference *from* Christ, but by being taken up *in* Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Righteousness is true humanness.

These things are evident in Jesus' treatment to this point of the ethic of His kingdom, but they come into sharp relief in the present context. For here the Lord revealed that, whatever the passion and preciseness of a person's life of "obedience," all of his holy exercises are condemning unless he is delivered from his self-enslavement. Jesus employed three examples – alms-giving, prayer, and fasting – to make the point, and He chose them purposely because they were fundamental to Israel's practical piety and sense of righteousness before God. Moreover, He treated each of the three in essentially the same way, which shows that He intended them to illustrate one main point rather than provide a list of holy activities for Christians to practice in a prescribed way. And Jesus' point is simply this: *True righteousness demands that a man be separated from himself – from his overarching, defining and governing self-awareness and self-concern.* As long as righteousness has **us** as its point of reference – not just what we do, but who we want ourselves and others to think we are – it succeeds in eluding us altogether (6:1).

- a. Jesus' first example involved the Jewish practice of **giving alms** (6:2-4). In a society lacking governmental assistance, alms-giving was a primary means for helping the poor, needy and infirmed in Israel. From the beginning God had demanded that the sons of Israel take note of the needy and powerless among them (*widows* and *orphans* epitomized this group of people; ref. Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 14:27-29, 24:17-22; etc.). Not only were they to provide material help to such individuals, they were to be careful not to exploit them or deny them justice. The Israelite people had a fundamental responsibility under the Law to "defend the defenseless" (Exodus 23:6; Deuteronomy 10:16-19, 24:14, 27:19), and this obligation included providing material support to those who couldn't support themselves. The Law made formal provision for this through *tithes* (Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 26:12-14), the *sabbatical year* (Exodus 23:11) and *gleaning* (Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22), but it also called for an attitude of *personal generosity* (Deuteronomy 15:1-11) that found one expression in alms-giving.

The Law of Moses didn't explicitly demand the giving of alms, but the practice was entirely consistent with the Law's spirit and broad interest in interpersonal relationships within the Israelite kingdom. Love for one's neighbor was central to Israel's ethic, and one obvious and important manifestation of that love was conscious, compassionate concern for the infirmed, destitute, and powerless. At the same time, love for God was Israel's first and preeminent obligation, and neighborly love was to reflect that first love and be an outgrowth of it. In loving their neighbor, the sons of Israel were loving their God.

- This was true first in the sense that every resident within the covenant community of Israel – Israelite and alien, great and lowly, wealthy and poor – was either directly a covenant child of God or enjoyed His favor. To love God meant loving His children and all those under His care.
- But love for a neighbor also expressed one's filial love for God in that it demonstrated sonship. A son is like his Father, and God shows compassion and mercy toward the needy and powerless and equity toward all (Deuteronomy 10:17-19; cf. also Psalm 10:12-14, 68:5, 146:9; etc.).

And so, just as alms-giving was a tangible expression of an Israelite's love, it was equally an expression of his *piety*. Thus charitable giving gradually came to signify a person's devotion to and worship of God as much as his concern for his fellow man. By the time of Jesus' birth, alms-giving had become a tangible and recognized indicator of one's piety, and so it was no surprise that the practice constituted an important touchstone in the credentials of Israel's "holy men."

The significance of this phenomenon is easily lost upon Christians who live in the context of a societal separation between Church and State. In America, social and political status and power aren't directly related to one's religious standing, but in theocratic Israel, civil and political power belonged to the religious elite. So, for instance, the Jewish high court in Jerusalem (the *Sanhedrin*) was comprised of members of Israel's priestly class and religious elite and was presided over by the designated high priest. Religious authority was the basis of political/civil authority and power, and power brings prestige and wealth. In Israelite society, the pious were the privileged, and over time this led to a theology in which temporal well-being was regarded as God's reward for a holy life. If the scholarly and pious were rewarded with wealth and ease, then it followed that poverty, affliction, and hardship were God's punishment upon sinners (cf. Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-2). Far from feeling ashamed or guilty about their privileged lives, the religious elite regarded their privilege as God's just reward to His "holy ones."

There is no doubt as to the outcome of this social and religious dynamic: Not only did Israelite men seek to acquire religious standing, they were equally determined to display that standing and obtain recognition for it. Prestige and "holiness" went hand in hand, and Israel's "holy men" did everything in their power to show themselves holy (ref. Matthew 23:1-14, 23-28).

So it was that the religious elite in Israel had adopted the practice of parading their piety (note Jesus' stinging caricature of sounding a trumpet) before the common people in order to be recognized and praised. Not simply giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting, but every religious exercise became a vehicle for furthering one's standing in the eyes of the people (cf. Luke 18:9-12, 20:45-21:4).

Alms-giving was to reflect and honor the Law's requirement of love for God and neighbor. Rightly regarded and practiced, it revealed a heart filled with genuine concern and compassion grounded in single-minded devotion to God. But what should have been an expression of sincere and spontaneous love had become a calculated act of self-concern and self-promotion. The appearance was that of piety, compassion and generosity; the reality behind the appearance was self-infatuation, disregard, and avarice.

Thus the practice of giving alms had become, in many instances, a matter of gross hypocrisy in Israel. What appeared to be concern for others was actually concern for oneself. Many seemingly devout and selfless men were hypocrites – self-deluded play-actors parading their feigned compassion for the purpose of securing the honor and praise of men. Their only true concern was the self-serving reward of human accolade, and Jesus declared that such individuals were successful in securing what they sought. If their goal were actually God's approbation, their reward was lacking; as it was, "*they had their reward in full*" (6:2).

This sort of obnoxious hypocrisy pervaded the Israelite kingdom, but it is utterly foreign to the kingdom of heaven. The authentic love that the Law of Moses had prescribed for the kingdom of Israel was now finding its realization in relation to the promised King and the kingdom He was heralding. The Law had commanded the sons of Israel to prove themselves sons of God by manifesting His nature and character in the world, but it couldn't effect what it required.

Fulfilling their covenant identity and calling as sons of God meant bearing witness in all things to their divine Father (so Jesus: John 1:18, 5:10-30, 14:8-11). But self-enslavement insured that the sons of Israel (as all men separated from the life of God in Christ) testified only to *themselves* – in their piety as much as in their profanity; in their righteousness as much as in their impurity. Estranged from God, even those regarded as most holy in Israel could only bear witness to themselves, though performing the most selfless and pious acts.

Thus Jesus' exhortation to *secrecy* in alms-giving is a call to seek only God's gaze and approbation in deeds of compassion and charity. Clearly, it's impossible that one's left hand should not know what the right is doing; furthermore, anonymity can be just as self-aggrandizing as open display, for people are ready to praise themselves for their charity even if no one else sees it. The need isn't for anonymity, but a new creation – for liberation from self-bondage. Godly charity begins with God's renewing work, and the One who works in the "secret place" gazes into that place; His reward will come to those who serve Him there.