
Lessons: Secret Righteousness

Matthew 6:1-18

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So much public religion, public displays, public shows of piety...

How are we to think about "doing good works" ...

~ According to Jesus, Christian 'righteousness' has these two dimensions, moral and religious. Some live as if our major duty lies in the sphere of religious activity, whether in public (church-going) or in private (devotional exercises). There is no need to choose between personal piety and public morality, religious acts of devotion to God and active ministry in the world, loving God and loving our neighbor. Jesus taught that authentic Christian 'righteousness' includes both.

In both spheres of righteousness Jesus calls his followers to be different. In Matthew 5 our righteousness must be greater than that of the Pharisees and greater also than that of the pagans. Now in Matthew 6, regarding 'religious' righteousness, He will draw the same two contrasts. He takes the ostentatious practice of religion saying, "You must not be like the hypocrites." (v.5) He then moves on to the mechanical formalism of religion saying, "Do not be like them." (v.8) Thus again Christians are to be different from both Pharisees and pagans, the religious and irreligious, the church and the world. That Christians are not to conform to the world is a familiar concept of the New Testament. But Jesus also anticipated the worldliness of the church itself. Matthew's writing to the church calls Jesus' followers not to conform to the nominal church. The Lord's disciples should be a truly Christian community. We should be distinct in our life and practice from the religious establishment. ~ (Adapted from Stott)

Make no mistake. Jesus challenges the authenticity of much of what passes for Christianity today. Will yours? Will you hear and heed some lessons...

About your Public Righteousness (v. 1)

At the beginning of this section is a warning which is worked out throughout.

6 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

Its Conundrum

Jesus has just said in chapter 5, "¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. "So, our good works are to be visible to others. We are to do them in a way that people will glorify God.

Now we are warned not do our acts of devotion so that people will celebrate us. At first this seems to be a contradiction. How do you do the first without incurring the censure of the second?

Its Content

Notice what Jesus actually says. Beware of your motivation for doing your good works. Be careful of doing what you do to be praised by others. It is a simple, but piercing warning. Why do you do public acts of devotion to God?

Its Consequence

What is the result of not heeding this warning? You will receive no reward from God in heaven. All of your good works which God promises to reward will be in vain.

This raises a question. Is it right to do what we do for a reward, even if that reward is from God? Since God holds out the promise of rewards to us, then it can't be wrong and in fact, is meant to motivate us. Shouldn't we want to please God for its own sake? No, God has not made us that way. But how can a reward not just be mercenary? C.S. Lewis explored this and helped me with it. This is a summary of what he wrote.

There is a kind of reward that is not natural to the desire or the pursuit. For example, to love someone and to pursue someone in marriage where money is the reward is wrong. Money is not the natural end of love or marriage. But to love and pursue someone where marriage is the reward is right. Why? Because marriage is the natural reward for loving pursuit. So, to seek to pursue and to please God for the reward He promises is right. It is the natural result and so is right. Further, often the reward God gives is more of Himself.

This is part of the reason that we are so strongly warned against doing what we do for the praise of men. We have substituted the reward from people for the reward of God Himself.

What follows are a series of illustrations:

~ The three paragraphs follow an identical pattern. In vivid and deliberately humorous imagery Jesus paints a picture of the hypocrite's way of being religious. It is the way of flamboyance, of outward show. Such receive the reward they really want, the applause of men. With this he contrasts the Christian way, which is secret, and the only reward which Christians want, the blessing of God who is their heavenly Father and who sees in secret.

This trio encompasses our duty to God, to others and to ourselves. For to give alms is to seek to serve the needy among us. To pray is to seek God's face and to acknowledge our dependence on Him. To fast (that is, to abstain from food for spiritual reasons) is intended at least partly to deny and so to discipline oneself. Jesus is not commanding these things. But He is directing how to please God when doing them. ~ (Adapted, Stott)

About your Giving (v.2-4)

He begins with our charity, our giving to help others who are needy. The old word for this is "alms".

² "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Not with Public Displays (v.2)

This is both humorous and grotesque. It is a caricature for certain, but caricatures are simply certain features exaggerated in a recognizable way. In this, the hypocrite forms a parade, puts trumpets in the lead and marches down the street of the poor shelling out his very public benefice. The most glaring examples of this are still found among many churches and religious institutions. Building named after donors. Lists of donors published on plaques in hallways and in prominent places. This is the world's way. This is not Christ's way.

As Secret as Possible (v.3-4a)

Having forbidden his followers to give to the needy in the ostentatious manner of the Pharisees, Jesus now tells us the Christian way, which is the way of secrecy. He expresses it by another negative: But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. This way, your giving may be in secret. The right hand is normally used when handing over our gift. Our left hand must not be watching. What does Jesus mean? Not only are we not to tell other people about our Christian giving; there is a sense in which we are not even to tell ourselves. We are not to be self-conscious in our giving. We are not to be self-congratulatory. Our self-consciousness will readily deteriorate into self-righteousness. As Stott reminds us, "So subtle is the sinfulness of the heart that it is possible to take deliberate steps to keep our giving secret from men while simultaneously dwelling on it in our own minds in a spirit of self-congratulation." (Stott)

Knowing God Rewards (v.4b)

The only one who is to applaud our giving is God. Now we totally reject the notion that our giving obligates God to fill up our bank accounts in return. The reward God gives may be Himself. It may be greater spiritual fruit. It may be a sense of gratitude to God for the ability to give. And it may be an overflowing provision for greater acts of charity.

"To sum up, our Christian giving is to be neither before men (waiting for the clapping to begin), nor even before ourselves (our left hand applauding our right hand's generosity) but 'before God', who sees our secret heart and rewards us with the discovery that, as Jesus said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Stott)

About your Praying (v.5-13)

Jesus addresses another area of religious life, prayer. This is an area filled with wrong-headed ideas, self-serving practices and vain, empty talk. It was true then. It is no less true today. It is true in false religions. Sadly, it is often true among Christians.

The Place of your Praying (v.5-6)

⁵“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Here there is no caricature, but it is no less hypocritical. Look at what is loved. To pray in public so that they may be seen is a deep treasure of the heart. Is all public praying wrong? No, that is not the point. But to love to be seen and heard in public praying is the sin of hypocrisy. Your love for people to affirm and approve how well you pray is what is moving you to pray out loud, in public gatherings, at church. Rather than prizing to be heard by God, you are pursuing to be heard by men. In this case, having been heard and admired by others is its own reward. Sadly, the very act that should be communion with God has removed the reward God promises and provides to those who commune with Him in prayer.

What does repentance look like? It quite simply is loving praying to God so much that you will do all of it in secret, alone with Him where His ears and His reward are all you crave.

The Problem in your Praying (v.7-8)

With scathing insight, Jesus indicts an all too common problem in our praying.

⁷“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

The Jews had fallen into praying empty phrases, often repeated, strung together thinking that the longer they prayed the more likely they were to be heard by God. Muslims and Catholics have religious phrases they repeat while being reminded what to say as they finger a string of beads. Too often our praying thinks that we are trying to change God’s mind or to move God to align His providences with our concerns and agendas.

But that is really not Jesus’ primary concern. He is condemning prayer that is stringing together religious or even Biblical phrases and sentences that really have no meaning. They become part of our prayer language. We repeat, “Father” over and over again. We string together pieces of Psalms or quote things back to

God. We talk and talk and talk without really saying anything. This is particularly deadly in public. While others are praying, we formulate our prayer in our head, so it is rehearsed and trotted out. We have a way of talking to God – a tone, a cadence, a voice – that we use with no one else.

In what ways is our praying not only unguided by the Scripture but largely shaped by the world? I have some suggestions to challenge you. By no means am I saying that these are wrong. But often, the doctrine or motivation behind them is not Biblical.

Why do we share prayer requests? Does God in some way respond to us when we have more people praying for a need? What tips the scales?

Why is most of our praying about our physical needs? I am not saying we should not pray for our physical needs; but why does it dominate our praying?

Why do we not address our prayers to the Father as almost every prayer in the New Testament does?

Do you talk to anyone like you talk to God? Then why do you talk to God the way you do?

The Priorities for your Praying (v.9-13)

Instead of empty phrases mindlessly repeated, God's people pray in a way that reflects their respect and relationship with God.

Pray then like this:

This is not intended to be a prayer that we recite or repeat. Otherwise, it simply becomes the opposite of what Jesus intended. We are to pray like this... What does that mean? Now, listen to me carefully. I am going to dismantle some long held, cherished notions about this prayer *in this context*.

This is not a prayer in and of itself; it is an instruction about praying.

This is a corrective to wrong praying, but not a formula nor an outline.

This is intended to establish the priorities for praying.

This was intended to be a corrective to the wrong praying in the context.

This is not an absolute guide for prayer since no written prayer in the New Testament even follows this.

Here then are what we are to focus on in praying as an antidote to repeating religious slogans. This is not the Lord's prayer. This is the disciple's prayer. And it is only as true followers, committed disciples in the kingdom of heaven that we move into the lessons taught here. What Jesus highlights are the kingdom priorities for disciples.

Praying that for God's Reverence in the World (v.9b)

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

When we pray, we must always remember that we are talking to our Father. Yes, He is God; that is what is meant by the second phrase. But we are addressing the Father. We acknowledge that He is in heaven. We have a kingdom that is from heaven and we have a Father who is in heaven. This will shape what is important to pray for.

Here is our first priority and our first request. We ask that God's name will be respected, revered, hallowed. This is a prayer for Christians that they will remember who God is and what He is like.

Praying for God's Agenda in the World (v.10)

¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

God's kingdom is a high priority for our praying. We don't think of this a lot because we are so focused on our individual needs and small little kingdoms of self, family and friends. But our praying should focus on what God is doing in the world. In one sense here are praying for the spread of the kingdom. It is an evangelistic prayer. May the kingdom of God spread everywhere.

Then there is an aspect of the kingdom that is our doing God's will. This is not about the nations or the world doing God's will. Kingdom is not about the conquest of nations. It is about the conquest of souls. So, kingdom focused prayer requests that we are poised and empowered to do the will of God. Do we pray this? We should not be uncomfortable to pray that God grace us and enable us and give us opportunities to do His will in difficult circumstances. It is easy to obey God when things are easy. We need prayers like this when we find doing God's will God's way challenging.

This is what is meant by "as it is done in heaven." It is a comparative, a standard. God's will is done in heaven with immediately, quickly with joy and a willing heart. It is a priority not only to obey God but to do so in a way that reflects what the kingdom in heaven is really like here on earth.

Praying for our Needs in the World (v.11)

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,

Yes, a kingdom priority is for our needs as we live in this world. The way this is stated is meant to remind us of God's provision of manna in the wilderness. It is a little hard to see in the English, but this is today's prayer for tomorrow's provision. Give us today what we need for tomorrow. So, this priority helps us to confess our dependence on God instead of relying on our own sufficiency. It reminds us that though God may use means in the world – our jobs, our friends, our church family – to provide for us, ultimately, we know that all our "daily bread" comes from God.

Praying about our Relationships in the World (v.12)

¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

This is not talking about financial debts. It is talking about spiritual debts. A priority in praying is that we confess our sins, our debts, our offenses to God asking Him to forgive them. Calling them a debt reminds us that our sins burden our relationship with God. How important is it that you are forgiven by God of your sins?

But there is a startling condition. In fact, it is embedded in our request. We have confidence in asking God to forgive us because we have forgiven those who have a debt of sin or offense against us. We cannot come to God with open arms asking for His forgiveness when our fists are clenched in un-forgiveness against another. (Greene) Can you pray this prayer? Do you pray it?

Praying about our Purity in the World

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Now, this request actually is a bit challenging when really think about what is being asked. "Father, I pray and ask you to not lead us into temptation." Really? What happens if we don't pray this? Does God then actually lead us into temptation? Does this have something to do with Israel in the wilderness? Does this have something to do with James 1? I believe so. We are asking God that when He leads us into the time of testing that it would not be the place of temptation. Yes but...

We have already seen this in Matthew, haven't we? Matthew 4:1 says, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Our priority here is that we will, like Jesus, pass the tests of our faith and resist the temptations that surround us. Matthew 4 also leads us directly to the next phrase. We ask God to deliver us from evil... probably not from doing evil, but from all the evil and mischief the evil one does in our world.

Is this something you ever pray about? Just be honest... not so much. Why is that?

The Highlight of your Praying (v.14-15)

I think we get an insight into what temptations we want to avoid and what the evil one is doing among God's people. Here it is.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

We are most often tempted to sin when others sin against us. Earlier this was described as a "debt", as something that was owed. Now it is described as a "trespass", someone has offended or violated God's boundaries against you. Yet, you refuse to forgive them when it is right to do so. You continue to hold

the charge against them when God no longer does. You withhold forgiveness. The consequence? God does the same. Your unwillingness to forgive others means you are disobeying God and your sin of disobedience will not be forgiven. Our vertical relationship with God has an important horizontal relationship with others. Brothers and sisters, is there anyone who is repentant that you will not forgive? Are you withholding forgiveness? Then your own sin is not forgiven by God. Your broken relationship with a brother or sister has broken your fellowship with God.

Do what is necessary to release the debt, to grant forgiveness and so be restored in fellowship to God. Then your praying will be an authentic experience of God.

About your Fasting (v.16-18)

Jesus now addresses what used to be a common discipline among God's people. The Jews had one required fast per year, on the Day of Atonement. But just as we are all prone to do, fasting was turned into a sad spectacle, a religious pity party.

¹⁶ "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

A word about fasting. Like what has gone before us, this not a command to fast. It is a guide for when you fast. Not once in the New Testament is fasting commanded. There are examples of fasting, but no precept to do so. Fasting may be a part of your life with God like having a quiet time or memorizing the Bible or special times of prayer. But let us not turn what are very personal expressions and experiences of our relationship with God into some kind of religious duty. I kiss my wife because I love her and like kissing her; no one has to command me to do it. If kissing becomes a duty then most of the delight is taken from it.

Not like the Hypocrites (v.16)

One person called this "rearranging the ashes." What was supposed to be the state of the soul was merely the state of body. Fasting for Jews was a matter of grief and penitence for sins. It had become a fake mark of spirituality. Yes, they were fasting. Jesus does not question that. But they put on the outward show that corrupted the practice.

Without Public Show (v.17)

Christians are never to be like this. Fasting is a spiritual discipline. It is a denial of something that we want and sometimes crave... food. But to intentionally go about in public advertising our self-discipline undoes the spiritual benefit. We live in the context of a gathered community. But that does not mean that we share everything that is going on with us. Fasting, like praying and giving, are

primarily what we do in secret before the Lord. We do not advertise it nor do we seek the approval or applause of others. Even when a community fast is called for, it should not be evident from people's demeanor whether they are participating or not.

One other word. Fasting is not just food. It may be an abstaining from other activities that tend to control us. We may fast for lots of reasons. We see many examples in the Bible that guide us. Sorrow for sin, consideration of big decisions, personal discipline. I don't think the modern idea of dieting has anything to do with this though a 40 day fast will probably reduce your weight.

To be Rewarded (v.18)

Our Father sees you fasting in secret. He responds and rewards you. His approval and His applause are what you should be seeking. Part of the reward is the fruit that is cultivated in the fasting you do.

Reflect and Respond

Jesus warned us against hypocrisy in our Christianity. He condemned the ostentatious devotion sometimes to be found in so much of Christianity of today. He also warned us equally against the mechanical formalism in much of public practice. Sincere obedience to God's Word is the key to an authentic devotional life. We are not playing to the gallery, but humbly living in the light of the Father's will. This is the attitude God will reward.

Here are our priorities for our praying. We pray for God's fame to go throughout the world.

We pray that God's kingdom will expand to all people groups.

We pray that we will do God's will in a way that pleases Him.

We pray that God will provide for us in dependance on Him.

We pray that God will keep us from temptation and the tempter.

We pray confessing our sins to God in the confidence of forgiveness and having forgiven others.

Is your religion, real?

While we can admire the insights of these lessons, we ought to more admire the greatness of Jesus. Indeed, there was and is no one who spoke like this man, no one who lived like this man, no one who died like this man, and no one who lived again like this man.