

Matthew 6:1-18

CENTRAL THEME: *For God, not people.*

As followers of Jesus we should live for the reward of our Father in heaven, not our peers on earth. If you are genuinely serving God you should not feel the need to advertise it to people.

Context:

Jesus is teaching about life in the kingdom of heaven. He began with the beatitudes, exposing how radically different the values of heaven are compared with the kingdoms of earth. He then explained the true meaning of the OT Law in 5:17-48, demonstrating that God always cared about the internal attitudes of the heart as much as external actions, and that we should seek to live out the full meaning of the law, not try to find caveats and exceptions. In a sense 6:1-18 returns to the theme of the beatitudes – whose blessing and approval do we want? That of God in heaven in eternity, or of people on earth in this life?

NB verses 9-15 have a separate study and so are not included here.

• **The principle: Motives matter to God (1)**

Jesus lays out the principle clearly in the first verse: When it comes to acts of religious devotion, motives matter to God as much as deeds.

Note first that it is not the public nature of the religious activity that he condemns, but the corrupted purpose in our hearts. He is not abolishing gathered worship or church prayer meetings. He is warning us about what is going on in our hearts when we are involved in public worship. We must not act in a way that is designed to impress others. *Why* we do things matters as much to God as *what* we do. He cares about motives, not just actions.

The second sentence is amazing when you think about it. When we give to the needy, we are not giving *our* money, we are redistributing *God's* money. When we pray, we are not meeting a need or lack in God – rather we are asking for things from him. And yet he says that when we do these things rightly we will receive a reward from him!

NB: Our culture stresses the value of authenticity and downplays the place of discipline and self-sacrifice. Jesus' words may seem to endorse that. However, note what he just assumes about our religious activity: He assumes that we will be giving regularly. He assumes that we will be attending the church prayer meetings. He assumes that we will be developing discipline over our desires in fasting. These things are just assumed, so he focusses on our motivations as we go about these acts of religious devotion. Let us not miss that!

The practice: The following 3 examples focus on the 3 key areas of Jewish piety. They are surely representative of all religious actions and we would be guilty of the sins exposed in 5:33-48 if we tried to limit the application of the principle to just these 3 areas of devotion. So in application we should think more broadly.

1. Giving (2-4)

Care for the poor is a concern of God and a theme that runs through the Bible (Deut 15:11; Psalm 41:1; Micah 6:8; James 1:27). Giving to the poor and to the work of God (*Tithing: Deut 14:22-24) were not optional extras, or something for mature believers.

They were standard practice for all the people of God. The danger with giving to the needy is that we can do it in such a way that we are not really *servicing* the poor at all, but are *using* the poor to serve our own reputation. Jesus refers to such a person as a hypocrite. The term comes from the theatre. Actors would wear a mask for their role, rather than make up. The mask covered their true face, their true self. It is an apt term for the issue Jesus is addressing. He is condemning theatrical religion, done to win the applause of an audience, rather than out of true piety. Jesus warns that such people receive all the reward that they will in the adulation of others.

It is clear that Jesus is exaggerating to make a point in v.3 since what he describes is impossible. But it shows that we must take seriously the call not to become a hypocrite whose charity is not about giving help, but about gaining adulation. The wonderful promise is that God can see what is given in secret, and God will richly reward. We must beware the subtle ways we draw attention to our charity, or ensure that others find out about it. Rather, we should give out of love for the needy and a desire to please our heavenly Father.

*Tithing is not a requirement for NT believers. But like stabiliser wheels on a bicycle it can be a good way to start giving. As maturity and opportunity increase, so should our giving.

2. Praying (5-8)

The second area is prayer. Again, we must be careful. Jesus is not condemning public prayer or even the enjoyment of public prayer. He's condemning those who enjoy others seeing them pray in public. One speaker points out that they position themselves on the corners so that two full streets can appreciate their devotion, rather than just one... Instead, we are commanded to pray in secret (6). Jesus is not banning all public prayer. Throughout the sermon on the mount he speaks in absolute terms when addressing a particular situation, and we must be aware of that to understand and apply him properly. What it does make clear is that the heart of our prayer life should be our own personal communication with God. We should be troubled if we find that we pray with far more eloquence and fervour when we are with others than when we are on our own. That is not a healthy sign. There is of course nothing wrong with finding prayer easier with others – it can help us focus and be less distracted. Furthermore we often grow and develop in our praying as we hear others pray. But... it does carry the danger that we can drift into praying for others to hear rather than for God.

The second issue is babbling like pagans. As Don Carson puts it '*prayer should not consist of heaped up phrases, idle repetitions, and the ridiculous assumption that the probability of an answer is in proportion to the total number of words in the prayer.*' The very last thing we want is young Christians terrified that they must use the correct words, but Jesus is not attacking those who stumble over their words or do not know what to say (verse 8 is a lovely encouragement for such people). His target is those who go on and on needlessly, and those who fill their prayers with inane verbiage '*Lord, I just really want to, Lord, really, just really, Lord, yes, Lord, really...*' Few of us are in danger of praying too long on our own. All of us can fall into the danger of praying empty words though.

3. Fasting (16-18)

Few British evangelicals place much emphasis on fasting. Jesus assumes that we will do it, as verse 17 makes clear. He is seeking to amend how we fast, not abolish the practice. In case it's useful. For the Jews of Jesus' day there were fasts associated with some of the great festivals of the Jewish calendar (such as the Day of Atonement). Once again though, what was a spiritual discipline had become self-promotion. Those fasting dressed and behaved in such a way that everyone would know they were performing this act of religious discipline. Again Jesus warns us not to participate in such hypocrisy.

* Given our unfamiliarity with the practice, it is perhaps worth considering the benefits of fasting which we find in Scripture. You can summarise them under 3 headings:

- i. fasting expresses dependence on God (Lord, I need your answer to this prayer more than I need food).
- ii. fasting expresses brokenness for sin (it's unpleasant to go without food).
- iii. fasting develops self-discipline (it's hard not to eat when you are hungry!).

For more detail, according to theologian Dan Whitney, fasting's spiritual purposes include:

- strengthening prayer (Ezra 8:23; Joel 2:13; Acts 13:3)
- seeking God's guidance (Judges 20:26; Acts 14:23)
- expressing grief (1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:11–12)
- seeking deliverance or protection (2 Chronicles 20:3–4; Ezra 8:21–23)
- expressing repentance and returning to God (1 Samuel 7:6; Jonah 3:5–8)
- humbling oneself before God (1 Kings 21:27–29; Psalm 35:13)
- expressing concern for the work of God (Nehemiah 1:3–4; Daniel 9:3)
- ministering to the needs of others (Isaiah 58:3–7)
- overcoming temptation and dedicating yourself to God (Matthew 4:1–11)
- expressing love and worship to God (Luke 2:37)

APPLICATION

Although the whole passage is application, it can be tricky to apply in our context, because culturally we are a long way from the religious people of his day. Jesus assumes that they will be living disciplined lives marked by regular, consistent practices of giving, praying and fasting. For many young Christians in the west, this is simply not the case. In other words, Jesus' dominant concern here is to address the way we do things that lots of us may not be doing...

His central message though applies to all of us: beware that we are not more in public than we are in private. Those who have no concern for God in their religious actions will receive nothing from God.

Note that Jesus does not tell us to do things for God's reward. We are to do things in the right way, out of love for God and others. As we do so, we find that God rewards! It's not wrong to want God's reward (6:20), but Jesus doesn't usually present it as our primary motivation.

QUESTIONS

- In Jesus' day people valued discipline, routine and self-sacrifice in their devotion to God. Why do you think many Christians today are suspicious of this? What do we value instead? [*we think devotion to God is expressed in authenticity, spontaneity and emotional expression*]
- What do you think the benefits are of having structured spiritual disciplines?

Verse 1:

- What basic principle does Jesus teach in verse 1?
- What reason does he give for it?
- How does this fit with what we have been learning in the Sermon on the Mount thus far?
 - Why is being seen doing good is so much more appealing to us than doing good in secret?

Verses 2-4

- What does Jesus assume his hearers are doing in v.2?
- How are Jesus' followers to behave differently from the hypocrites?
- Who gives the reward in v.4? Who do the hypocrites receive their reward from?
 - What subtle ways do we use to draw attention to our giving to church / charity?

Verses 5-8 [we will look at verses 9-15 in depth next time]

- Do you find it easier to pray in private or public? Why?
- Why do the hypocrites stand on the corner of the street to pray? [*2 streets' worth of people can see them!*]
 - When or where are we most likely to fall into hypocrisy in prayer?
- What 2 things are emphasised about God in v.6?
 - How should this motivate us to pray privately?
 - Should we cancel all public prayer meetings? What is the heart attitude that Jesus wants?
- What kind of prayer is warned against in v.7?
- If we struggle to get the right words out and stumble in our prayers, are we guilty of this?
- How does verse 8 encourage us if we are not confident prayers?

Verses 16-18

- What do you think the purpose of fasting is? [*perhaps read out the notes*]
- How are people in Jesus' day drawing attention to their fasting?
- What instead should they do and why?
 - Why do acts of religious devotion like fasting lose their value when done to be seen by others?

Jesus' point applies to all of our acts of service and devotion, so let's think more broadly:

- In pairs: how would you summarise Jesus' teaching in this passage?
- In what other areas of our Christian life might we do things to be seen?
- What should we do if we are aware that our motives for doing good / serving at church are wrong?