

Sermon on the Mount
Authentic Spiritual Service
Matthew 6:1-18

Introduction

Matthew Chapter 5 records the first three themes of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

- The first emphasizes the character of authentic disciples in the teaching of the beatitudes.
- The second highlights the influence of authentic disciples in the teaching about salt and light.
- The third theme focuses on the conduct of authentic disciples in life situations.

Jesus addresses six examples by addressing murder, adultery, divorce, keeping your word, retaliation, and showing love for enemies.

Matthew Chapter 6 contains the fourth important theme, which I want us to look at today. Jesus wants us to focus on building a relationship with God that motivates our service. We serve God because we want to bring honor to Him, not so we can receive praise and recognition from others. For many people, public acclaim is everything. But public recognition can be superficial and short-lived and fades away almost immediately. The service of an authentic servant will shine even in a quiet place where no one else but God can see it.

Christian servants should always serve as if they were serving God. This attitude of serving strengthens our relationship with God. The first 18 verses of Matthew Chapter 6 emphasize our sensitivity to serving God and can be divided into three specific parts:

- almsgiving (6:2-4),
- prayer (6:5-15) and
- fasting (6:16-18)

Each of these was a necessary part of the first-century Christian life.

Jesus gives us two principles to consider:

- 1) Do not seek to display your charitable deeds before men and
- 2) Seek only the favor of God.

Martyn Lloyd Jones said he prays this prayer when he wakes up in the morning, "Oh Lord, throughout the whole of this day, everything I do and say and attempt and think and imagine will be under Your watchful eye. You will be with me. You see everything. You know everything. There is nothing I can do or attempt that You are not fully aware of it all. "Thou God, seest me!"

In each of the three illustrations Jesus uses in chapter 6, He describes false spiritual service, with a reoccurring sentence, "Verily I say unto you, they have their reward." He uses it in verse 2, verse 5, and verse 16. He also uses the word

“hypocrite” in each of these three examples. Jesus seems to say that your reward will correspond to your motivation.

If your serving is not authentic and genuine, the only reward you will receive is the applause you get from those who see you do it! But, God rewards people for the service they do to honor Him, regardless of whether anyone sees them do it or not.

Let’s look at the first example, which he calls almsgiving.

I. Give from the Heart

Almsgiving is giving straight from the heart. Let’s read the first four verses of chapter six, “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise, you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, 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. Assuredly, I say to you; they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.” (Matthew 6:1-4 NKJV)

The Greek word translated ‘alms’ or ‘charitable deeds’ occurs thirteen times in the NT. ‘Alms’ may be an archaic word, but the concept is still practiced in our society. We might define it as showing ‘mercy or having pity on someone. It’s a feeling of compassion and the giving of certain gifts or blessings to someone in need. The Zondervan Bible dictionary renders the word; ‘benevolent giving.’

Almsgiving is an act of giving something to those in need out of a feeling of compassion or mercy. Deuteronomy 15 says, “For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.’” (Deuteronomy 15:11 NKJV)

Leviticus 23 says, ‘When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I *am* the LORD your God.’ “(Leviticus 23:22 NKJV)

Throughout the Old Testament, God made abundant provision by commanding His people to look after their own, not only on a yearly and sabbatical basis but by command, were forbidden to turn a blind eye to those among them who were materially poor.

Almsgiving was considered to be righteous. But how is it possible to feel compassion and pity ‘by commandment’? The truth is, your feelings don’t have to be involved for you to do what is right. Feelings were not necessary for the Jew to obey God and take care of those in need. The giving a gift could easily be wholly devoid of emotion. Proverbs 19:17 says, “He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, And He will pay back what he has given.” (Proverbs 19:17 NKJV)

Over time Judaism turned almsgiving into a self-serving outward form of righteousness that they used to distinguish themselves as pious and holy in the sight of God – and especially in the view of others. Eventually, their salvation came to be based on their own actions rather than upon the mercy of God. In time, almsgiving abandoned the necessary emotions of compassion and mercy. It became a beneficial religious duty and a source of immediate praise and gratification to the person who performed it.

In Jesus' day, righteousness and almsgiving had come to be regarded as synonymous terms. The Talmud stated that, 'The performance of works of mercy is set forth as a means whereby man may be accounted righteous in the sight of God, like the fulfillment of the commandments of the Law.'

By the time of Christ, Judaism had elevated almsgiving to the point of being an act of devout piety. It was considered a much greater benefit for the person who performed the acts of benevolence above its blessing for one who received it! There was an abundance of poor by NT times who gathered at different places in the land looking to receive alms from the religious Jews. Almsgiving had become an industry complete with professional alms-receivers who earned a living off the sympathy of others. Some beggars in the streets were nothing more than people who carved out a niche for themselves in a lucrative market where they collected more money per day than they could have made on the job. Not that there weren't genuine beggars. It would be wrong to think of every person on every street corner as having taken up begging because it pays better than a 9 to 5 office job!

Even Judas in Matthew 26 complained that the precious ointment used on Jesus' feet could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. Jesus' reply is significant because He rebukes Judas and explains that the ointment was used as a prophetic act symbolizing His burial. He told Judas, "For you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always. For in pouring this fragrant oil on My body, she did *it* for My burial." (Matthew 26:11-12 NKJV)

In first-century Judaism, both a 'poor fund' and a 'pauper's dish' appear to have been corporately collected offerings used to provide money for the needy. But there were also strict rules that determined who could benefit from such a fund (Peah 8:7, Pesahim 10:1). The 'poor fund' could only be used if a Jew didn't have sufficient resources for fourteen meals. The 'pauper's dish' was available to those who didn't have enough for two meals.

'Almsgiving' was also a significant trait of the early Church. Believers in Galatia took great pains to look after those in need locally (Gal 2:9-10, I John 3:17). They also contributed to the welfare of fellowships that resided in poorer areas or had specific material needs (Rom 15:26, II Cor 8:10-11).

Almsgiving was something Jesus expected of His followers. Notice that Mt 6:2 states 'when you give alms' not 'if you give alms'! The Early Church saw almsgiving as a response to their love for God and not as an act they hoped would win God's love for themselves. They saw in Christ everything that they needed and, as a

response to the full provision of God. They also saw and felt the need to reach out to reflect God's work of love to others. They believed it was only necessary for God to witness your charitable acts, which they also believed was true for prayer and fasting.

When Jesus said, "When you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing," He is probably suggesting that the person who gives alms should not dwell on the goodness of His deed but instantly forget about what he has just done. In other words, don't slap yourself on the back for being such a great person just because you saw a need and met it. That doesn't mean you have to lie about it or deny you did it. Just don't allow your life to become consumed by having to let other people know how generous you are!

John Stott writes, 'Christian giving is to be marked by self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, not by self-congratulation.' The reward we should desire is the eternal and everlasting reward!

II. Pray from the Heart

The next example of authentic spiritual service used by Jesus is Prayer. In verse 9, is Jesus' teaching on prayer, "In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as *it is* in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:5-15 NKJV)

Verses 5 and 6 address where we should pray. Jesus is not condemning public prayer or Christians praying in groups. He is not saying that prayer must be silent. The church described in Acts was known for its vocal prayer meetings. Second, Jesus is not ruling out the use of repetition in prayer. The scriptures teach that intercessory prayer is more than just a hurried shopping list we read off to God. James says that the "effectual fervent prayer of a righteous person avails much." There is nothing wrong with repeating a prayer. It sustains our interest in the need. Jesus' concern was more for those who prayed for to be seen as devout by others.

I think every believer should be able to pray publically. But I don't think public praying has to be grandiose to be effective praying! Nor does God take a greater interest in those who pride themselves on not being hypocritical like those who love to pray out loud – so they pray silently!

In Luke 18:9, Jesus tells the story about a Pharisee and a publican who went to pray. The Pharisee thanked God he was not like the sinners and boasted how much better he was than others. The publican just bowed his head and beat his breast

and cried, "Lord, be merciful to me, for I am a sinful man." Jesus said, "I tell you, the publican went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted."

Hypocrisy can infect anyone. That's why Jesus says, "Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret." It is in the private place that we are to avoid vain repetition. We can't allow ourselves to fall asleep mentally when we pray. When your mind kicks out of gear, your mouth begins mumbling trivialities to God. A lot of people pray that way! Many of the Eastern religions practice emptying their minds through repetitious prayer. They worship many deities. They aren't sure which ones are best qualified to help them, so they keep invoking names of various gods in a torrent of repetitious prayer, hoping to get through to the right one. Jesus said our praying should not be like that. We know who we are praying to!

We know our heavenly Father always hears us when we pray, and we know it is not necessary to impress Him with our volume or length of prayer.

III. Fasting that involves the Heart

The third illustration Jesus uses to make his point about practicing authentic spiritual service concerns fasting. Have you ever tried to fast? Most of us have had to fast a meal or two to prepare for some medical procedure. But have you ever tried fasting for a spiritual reason? I sometimes wonder if the absence of fasting in our life is any indication that we are not really desperate for God to be at work in us?

Are you so content with your life that your praying really costs you nothing – no self-denial, no seeking desperately after God, no missed meals to spend time in prayer? That doesn't mean you have to look gloomy or put ashes on your face to appear holy and pious. The self-righteous in Jesus day decorated themselves in ashes and sackcloth to impress everyone with their pious prayer life.

Jesus told his disciples that they were to "anoint their head and wash their face when they fast." They weren't to call attention to their prayer life. If the Father sees all things, then an outward display before men is not necessary. Even when you're fasting, you should go about your regular business without broadcasting that you're fasting. You don't have to deny that you're fasting, but you don't have to call attention to it either.

The point of fasting is to focus your time and energy on prayer. Your prayer is devoted to God - not to impress other people. That's why there doesn't need to be any outward visible signs that you are fasting.

Conclusion

In Matthew Chapter 5, Jesus instructs us to invest ourselves in doing good deeds. But in Chapter 6, he cautions us not to make a show of them.

Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting help keep us focused on what pleases God instead of what pleases us. They challenge us to carefully examine our motives so we can consistently and consciously submit our lives to God.

As followers of Christ, we live our lives under the watchful eye of God as well as before people. It's nice to be acknowledged for your accomplishments, but we don't live for the recognition. The reward of God's approval and provision is enough. As followers of Christ, we live to please God. The benefits we receive by practicing authentic devotion to God are reward enough. So be genuine. Be authentic. Be real in practicing your devotion to God and let your rewards come from Him.