

Teaching of Jesus

Authentic Spiritual Service

Matthew 6:1-18

Introduction

One of the central teachings of the Sermon on the Mount is how different life in Christ is from religion. Citizenship in God's Kingdom is obtained by accepting Jesus as God's true Messiah and embracing his death on the Cross as your death and his resurrection from the dead as your eternal life. You cannot earn God's favor through good works or being religious. You can only obtain God's salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

In the last part of Chapter 5, Jesus critiques the religion of the scribes and Pharisees and how they teach a completely different ways to gain God's favor and enter into God's kingdom. Jesus exposes the plan as impossible and introduces God's plan of Grace.

In Chapter 6, Jesus teaches how religious leaders teach fundamentally different forms of spirituality. In verse 1, He delivers a warning that explains the critical differences between religious piety and following him. Verse 1 says, "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." (Matthew 6:1 NKJV)

Religious piety focuses on outward, external forms of good works; Jesus wants his followers to focus on authentic spiritual service. Outward religious piety focuses on impressing other people; Jesus wants his followers to love and serve God because of His grace and love for them, even if no one else sees. The reward of outward religious piety is to impress others with how religious you are. Some even use doing favors as leverage for money, positions of power, or contacts.

The reward of choosing Jesus' way is to grow in grace and effectiveness for God. – truly becoming Salt and Light in the World! Let's see how Jesus applies this to the three most popular forms of piety in the religion of the scribes and Pharisees.

I. Genuine Giving

In verse 2, Jesus says, "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." (Matthew 6:2 NKJV)

"Giving alms" means giving to those in need. Giving alms is rooted in the Old Testament, teaching that God cares for the poor. To be devoted to what God cares about means also caring for the people he cares about.

But the religious leaders of Jesus day found ways to pervert a beautiful way of worshipping God by turning it into a public relations campaign for themselves. Sadly, even the Christian church has had a rich legacy of this behavior. It goes back as far as Ananias and Sapphira right up to the present day of naming buildings for donors or buying seats on the board of directors. Jesus says, Those who do this are always trying to impress people with how spiritual they are.

But that behavior doesn't impress God and will cause you to miss out on the real reward. In verse 3, Jesus says, "**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 6:3-4 NKJV)

What does it mean to give "in secret?" Jesus is not saying that all of your giving must be anonymous. Some people cite this passage as a reason why they refuse to make a giving pledge, use giving envelopes, or keep a record of their giving. If the truth be known, the real reason they don't keep a record is probably just a cover-up for how little they really give!

Jesus had a moneybox out of which he directed the disciples to give to the poor? Even Jesus kept a record of the money. In John Chapter 12 it says, "Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's *son*, who would betray Him, said, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. But Jesus said, "**Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always.**" (John 12:3-8 NKJV)

In the New Testament church, people often gave publicly. Barnabas, for example, is singled out for his generosity. Acts 4:36 says, "And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold *it*, and brought the money and laid *it* at the apostles' feet." (Acts 4:36-37 NKJV)

The Apostle Paul also called on the churches to make pledges. 1 Corinthians 16 says, "On the first *day* of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come." (1 Corinthians 16:2 NKJV)

In 2 Cor. 9:5, Paul writes, "Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren to go to you ahead of time, and prepare your generous gift beforehand, which *you had* previously promised, that it may be ready as *a matter of* generosity and not as a grudging obligation." (2 Corinthians 9:5 NKJV)

New Testament church leaders had to have a record of generosity so they could lead by example in this area. In verse 3, Jesus says that when you give, you should not make a big deal of it to others or even make that big a deal of it to yourself. Jesus makes a point of this in his parable in Luke 17.

And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.' " (Luke 17:7-10 NKJV)

We are God's stewards; we are responsible for managing his resources in ways that advance his kingdom. Doing this is not heroic; it is just doing our job! If you tell people how much you give to God's work, it should only be because you think it will help them to become more generous stewards, not because you want them to be impressed with you. Verse 4 says, "that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly." (Matthew 6:4 NKJV)

If you have the right attitude, there are some incredible and eternal rewards for giving.

II. Sincere Praying

In verse 5, Jesus says, "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. (Matthew 6:5 NKJV)

Jesus says the religious leaders were perverting personal communication with God by turning it into an opportunity to impress others. Verse 6 says, "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." (Matthew 6:6 NKJV)

What does it mean to pray "in secret?" Is Jesus forbidding prayer with other people? There are some Christians who cite this passage as support for their refusal of corporate prayer. But that can't be what he means because it contradicts the rest of scripture. Jesus prayed out loud with his disciples in Gethsemane in John 17 and in public in John 11. In Matthew 18, He says, "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:19-20 NKJV)

The New Testament Christians followed Jesus' example and did this all the time. In Acts Chapter 4, when the magistrates threatened the disciples it says, "And being let go, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You *are* God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them." (Acts 4:23-24 NKJV)

1 Corinthians 14:16 says, "What is *the conclusion* then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks since he does not understand what you say? (1 Corinthians 14:15-16 NKJV)

Some of you need to break this barrier and establish the habit of publicly praying out loud!

I think there are two main applications of this verse: #1) Prayer (alone or with others) should be to God and, therefore, be sincere and personal. God is far more pleased with an awkward prayer expressing your honest thoughts and feelings than with a polished performance. #2) Praying aloud with others should be the "outflow" of our private communication with God. How does God reward this kind of prayer? - With the greatest reward of all: personal fellowship with him.

We'll talk more about this next week when we look at Jesus' model prayer.

III. Effective Fasting

In verse 16, Jesus says, "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. (Matthew 6:16-18 NKJV)

Although the Old Testament did not emphasize fasting, the scribes and Pharisees fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. They commonly left their "bed head" intact and even put flour on their faces so people would ask them why they looked so bad. Jesus said they had their reward because people noticed that they were fasting and were impressed by it.

But what does it mean to "fast in secret?" It does not mean that we should emphasize literal fasting! Well, unlike the practice of disfiguring your face, wearing black, and praying loudly, Jesus said, fast and pray sincerely, but don't advertise it. Fasting also has a rich legacy of hoping to pay for your sins and twist God's arm to answer your prayer requests.

But God says in Isaiah 58, "Cry aloud, spare not; Lift up your voice like a trumpet; Tell My people their transgression, And the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek Me daily, And delight to know My ways, As a nation that did righteousness, And did not forsake the ordinance of their God. They ask of Me the ordinances of justice; They take delight in approaching God. 'Why have we fasted,' *they say*, 'and You have not seen? *Why* have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?' "In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, And exploit all your laborers. Indeed you fast for strife and debate, And to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as *you do* this day, To make your voice heard on high. Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? *Is it* to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the LORD? "*Is* this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? *Is it* not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?" (Isaiah 58:1-7 NKJV)

In other words, true fasting is cultivating a lifestyle of sacrificial service for others. Doing this with the right attitude without feeling like you're a martyr who lets everyone know how much you're sacrificing, but cheerfully, out of love for them and trusting gratitude to God, is true authentic spiritual service.

Fasting is all about learning to sacrifice things that cater to the flesh in order to concentrate on spiritual service. And what are those rewards of "fasting in secret?" Isa. 58 verse 8 says, Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I *am*.' "If you take away the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, *If* you extend your soul to the hungry And satisfy the afflicted soul, Then your light shall dawn in the darkness, And your darkness shall *be* as the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, And satisfy your soul in drought, And strengthen your bones; You shall be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. Those from among you Shall build the old waste places; You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; And you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In. "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, *From* doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy *day* of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking *your own* words, Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 58:8-14 NKJV)

Learning to give sacrificially to others is the key to true eternal happiness. John 13:17 says, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." (John 13:17 NKJV)

Paul told the Ephesians in Acts 20:35, "I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:35 NKJV)

Conclusion

There's a big difference between being religious and being spiritual. If you're turned off by those whose religious piety is self-serving, you're in good company because Jesus feels the same way. If you want to know and experience Jesus' way, remember that it is rooted in a grace-based relationship with God, which you begin by receiving Jesus (Rev. 3:20).

Revelation 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20 NKJV)