

February 26, 2017
Sermon Manuscript

Matthew 6:1-15

“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.

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.*

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. ⁶ But 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.*

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. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ Pray then like this:*

*“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.*

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

¹¹ *Give us this day our daily bread,*

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

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

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.*

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.*

Clarifying our Motivations for Giving and Prayer

This morning we continue with part eight of our series on the Sermon on the Mount and, once again, I'll be drawing on Dallas Willard's *Divine Conspiracy*. But at this point, eight sermons in, it is probably worth taking a moment to review where we've come from, so far. #

We began this series by examining Jesus' proclamation just before the Sermon on the Mount that "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). Although many assume the phrase "kingdom of heaven" refers to the afterlife, Jesus was actually announcing something available to us here and now: the opportunity to live in his wisdom and power. Indeed, we are operating in the "Kingdom of heaven" whenever we surrendered to Christ's will and living in reliance upon Him.

We then moved on to the Beatitudes, where Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount, saying, "blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn... blessed are the meek, and so on". Now, unfortunately many have been taught that the Beatitudes are a list of virtues we must work hard to attain if we want *any hope* of receiving God's blessing. But by looking at the context, we were able to see that the Beatitudes are really about the kingdom life, and the blessings that come from it, being available to everyone. With the Beatitudes, Jesus is actually promising he will bless all who are tired, weary, hurting, lonely, merciful, pure, and persecuted if they will surrender to living in his kingdom.

In fact, what we've learned over the past 7 weeks is that probably the *biggest* mistake we can make in our spiritual lives is to rely solely on our own effort and power. That was the mistake of the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day, who focused all their energy on making themselves "righteous". Jesus compared this to cleaning the outside of a cup, while leaving the inside dirty. Instead true righteousness comes when we seek for the Lord to change our hearts, cleaning us from the inside out.

Well, it's a good thing we had all of that background before we approached *the rest* of chapter 5, because, as we've walked through it over the past four weeks, we've heard Jesus teach...

²¹ "You have heard it said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment... and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

We've heard Jesus teach... ²⁷ "You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

And... ³³ "Again you have heard it said, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' ³⁴ But I say to you... Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'

Then last week...³⁸ *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*

If we took any of these as things Jesus is calling us to pull up our bootstraps and accomplish in our own power – as so many do – they would be awfully bad news; and we’d be right to wanna just throw in the towel. But instead, having learned that Jesus wanted to help us obey these commands – that he was casting a vision of the sorts of people He wants to make us into by changing our hearts – we were able to hear these passages as good news, making us hungry to press into him all the more. #

Indeed, as Willard says, “in the Sermon on the Mount we are not looking at laws, but at a life: a life in which the genuine laws of God eventually become naturally fulfilled” as we seek to live in his kingdom. Simply put, in the life of the kingdom: we pursue God and God loves through us. ##

However, though this kingdom life may sound simple, it is not without its obstacles. And as the Sermon on the Mount continues into the sixth chapter of Matthew, Jesus begins to highlight certain attitudes that can hinder or block us from living in the kingdom. And the first hindrance is the subject of our gospel passage, where Jesus says, *“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. 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.*

So, Jesus identifies the first hindrance to operating in his kingdom as “desiring the approval of others,” especially for how devout we are.

Later in Matthew 23, Jesus notes that the scribes and Pharisees, were especially motivated in this way: as they did *everything* “with the aim of being noticed by others” (v. 5-7). Thus, Jesus’ hearers would’ve known all too well what he was referring to when he talked about “sounding a trumpet” when giving to the needy.

Jesus calls them “hypocrites”. Now, in his day the term hypocrite actually referred to a stage actor. Back then the Romans had built many theaters in the area – including ones in Jericho, Samaria, and Jerusalem. There was even a theater just a few miles from Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth. So Jesus is calling these people “actors” for giving – not because they really *care* about the needy – but for the praise and admiration of others. Interestingly, it’s only as a result of Jesus using the term “hypocrite” like he does here that the word ever came to mean what it does today: referring to someone who practices deceit.

Now, this hypocrisy Jesus refers to is something we are all susceptible to. And yet, when we hear how Jesus describes the consequences of doing this, it's can be difficult to understand the seriousness of this practice. He says, "when you give to the needy... (in order to) be praised by others then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven." You see, whenever we hear the word "heaven" our minds almost always picture the afterlife. And yet, this interpretation robs Jesus' words here of most of their punch! You see, if we assume Jesus is talking about the afterlife here, it's easy for us to rationalize: "Well, so what if giving to the needy for the praise of others means I won't be rewarded for it in heaven?! If I'm still in heaven, how bad a consequence can that really be?!?" But this is why I *love* how Willard clarifies what Jesus really *means*. Listen to how Willard re-states the words of verse 1 to clarify what Jesus means. He says, "Be sure not to do your rightness before human beings with the intent of being seen by them. Otherwise your Father, the one in the heavens, will have nothing to do with it." Did you catch that? "Your Father... will have nothing to do with it." Jesus is saying that when the good or religious things we do are motivated by wanting to be seen by others, God will have nothing to do with it!!! Whoa!

Now, you say, "well, how does Willard interpret Jesus' words to mean that?" Well, the thing about God is: God "does not like to be present where he is not wanted. And (being God) he knows when he is wanted and when he is not." So when we're trying to do good deeds for attention, God will let us do it (he has given us free will), but he will make himself scarce. As Willard says, because we are looking for human approval and esteem, "God courteously stands aside because, by our wish, it does not concern him." This is why Jesus remarks, "*Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward,*" because that human approval is what we wanted.

So, you see, whenever we give to the needy – or do anything devout – in order to be praised by others, what we're really doing is cutting God out of the situation. When we serve a person in this spirit, we are *robbing* that encounter from having any eternal impact, because God's not present in it (we've run him off). *And* we're robbing ourselves, because by seeking this human approval we've disconnected from God and are no longer operating in his kingdom. So, while operating this way may swell our ego, it will actually *shrivel our soul*. ##

Well, does this sound like good news or bad news? Since every single one of us has *surely* performed good deeds in order to receive the praise of others, it can be easy to receive this as bad news. And yet, the *reason* Jesus is bringing it up is because he doesn't want the good that we do to go to waste! He wants us to involve him in our kindnesses so he can bless others through us! And that is certainly good news!

So, instead of seeking the praise of others, in verse 3 he teaches, "...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."

Now, many have wondered what on earth Jesus is talking about here. Doing something with our right hand without our left hand knowing it? Well, perhaps an illustration will clarify what Jesus is talking about. Do you remember what it was like when you were first learning to drive? Do you remember how you had to be conscious of everything? “Ok, I’m gonna let my foot off the break, and press down on the accelerator. Now I want to turn left, so I’m gonna turn on my blinker, and begin to break, and then turn the steering wheel.” Do you remember that? How everything was so *deliberate* and required so much focus?!? Well, now that you’ve been driving for decades, does it still require that kind of focus? Not at all! You just get in and go! In fact, driving can be so automatic that when my mind is on something else, sometimes I’ll just arrive home and suddenly feel like, “Man, how’d I get here?” But my brain was on autopilot.

Another example is breathing. Does anyone have to tell their lungs to keep breathing? No, they just do it. Certainly, we can pause our breathing if we want, overriding the autopilot, but otherwise our body just does it.

Well, this illustrates what Jesus is talking about when he says, “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” Jesus is not giving law, but rather a promise about kingdom living: that the more we live surrendered and connected to Jesus, the more we will find ourselves just naturally blessing people without even being conscious of it! And it won’t even feel like a big deal; and we *certainly* won’t be doing it for the attention of others. It will just *come out of us* without even thinking!

But Jesus saves the coolest part of this for last, when he says, “And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Jesus is saying that it is often these things that come out of us naturally, from just walking with the Lord, that God will use the **most powerfully** to impact the lives of others. And when we’re operating in the kingdom, that’s *exactly* what we want, isn’t it? We desire that God to bless others in the Lord, not to bring ourselves glory! ## ## ## ##

Well, as we read on, we find Jesus teaching something similar about prayer. And this is the last subject we’ll look at today – we’ll save fasting for Ash Wednesday. In verse 5, Jesus says, “And when you pray, you must not be like the (actors). 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.” So, Jesus is warning against allowing our prayer to be motivated by trying to impress people or show them how religious we are, because again we are then choosing against operating in his kingdom and our prayers are going to be ineffective. God’s not going to be in such prayer or respond to them, because that’s *not* what we’re seeking. So Jesus continues, “⁶ But 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.”

Now, Jesus’ point here is not that we *have to only* pray in secret. Remember, Jesus is not giving law here; he’s giving illustrations of the kingdom life. But if it’s true what Willard says,

that prayer is our method of understanding what and who God is, then it is only natural that we'll often seek to do that prayer where our focus can be solely on Him – such as going to our room and shutting the door. It's sorta like closing our eyes to pray. Do y'all know anywhere that the Bible says we need to close our eyes to pray? No, but closing our eyes is naturally going to lessen the potential for distraction and help us maintain our focus on God. So, that's why people will do it. Making God our focus is the key. Because then, as Jesus says in verse 7, "your Father who sees in secret will reward you." As James says, "The prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (5:16). # #

But Jesus is not quite done talking about prayer. In verse 7 he continues on the subject, saying, "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. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ Pray then like this..." And then Jesus gives *His* prayer, which we know as "The Lord's Prayer".

So here, in verses 7 to 9, Jesus is warning against the mistake of believing that the power of our prayers has anything to do with the amount of words that we use. In our Life Groups we do one-sentence prayers. And *one* of the reasons is because one-sentence prayers can be just as effective as multiple-sentence prayers since, as Jesus says, "(our) Father knows what (we) need before (we) ask him, anyway." But Jesus points out that when we approach prayer as if we have to say just the right words, we're actually falling into the trap of the pagans, who when they pray to their false gods, believe the more incantations they offer, the more likely their god is to do what they want. But, they fail to understand that prayer isn't about manipulating God. Rather it's an "intelligent conversation" between creatures and our Creator.

Of course, the irony here is that right after Jesus discourages praying ritualistically, he gives us the prayer that is most often prayed ritualistically (or without thought). But here Jesus is providing a corrective to anyone who might conclude from the previous paragraph that believers should never pray publicly or corporately. Jesus is not "giving a law that forbids prayer in public, (nor is he requiring that we) pray only with the words he gives in (this) model prayer." Rather, in all of this, Jesus is drawing our attention to our hearts. For, as Willard says, Kingdom praying and its effectiveness is entirely a matter of our innermost hearts being totally open and honest before God." ##

Well, as I mentioned, I will hold off on expositing Jesus' words on fasting until Wednesday night. But to summarize: Jesus is not teaching that we should hide our good deeds or our prayers. As Willard says, "That might be appropriate in some cases, but it is not Jesus' point." There is nothing inherently wrong with people seeing our good deeds or knowing we're praying. Just like "adultery in the heart," that we looked at a few weeks ago, "the issue here is

one of intents and purposes. Not did we look at someone and sexually desire them,” that’s going to happen. Where we cross the line into sin is when “we look at someone in order to sexually desire them.” And the same goes for good deeds and prayer, what is important is “not are we seen doing (it), but are we doing (it) in order to be seen.” I’ll say that again: What is important is “not are we seen doing (the good deed or prayer), but are we doing (it) in order to be seen.” Because, when we are doing it to be seen won’t be good for anyone involved.

So, all Jesus reveals here boils down into a perhaps shocking truth: that actions that almost anyone would consider to be good – such as giving to the needy, prayer – are actually going to be harmful to us when our motive is to glorify ourselves rather than God. Such actions will shrivel our souls, so we can even say it would be better if we just didn’t do them.

And this lesson is timely as we prepare to enter the season of Lent. My prayer is that all of us will take some time over the next few days to consider whether God might be calling us to fast from something, such as some food or some activity, or take on a new discipline, such as giving that additional time to read scripture or a spiritual book or growing in our knowledge of God through our Lenten study here. As you consider whether to fast from something or take on a new discipline during Lent, *or both*, ask God to search you and to align the motivations of your heart. The purpose of doing something for Lent is not so we can tell our friends what we’re doing for Lent – though if they find out, that’s okay. With whatever you might do, ask God to give you the sole motivation of coming to know Him more deeply.

And as we gather this Wednesday for our Ash Wednesday service, the point of that is not for others to notice that our church attendance is not restricted to Sundays or to have others outside of the service to be impressed by the ashes on our forehead, because then we will have received our reward. The point of Ash Wednesday is to come for Jesus, to acknowledge our need for his grace for our lives and particularly for our journey through Lent: to ask his help to follow through.

If we seek the approval and esteem that comes from human beings, that is the best we’ll get. But if we seek to glorify the Lord and operate in the kingdom, our reward will be great.

Amen.

Source used: Dallas Willard’s *Divine Conspiracy*

