

The King's Sermon

The Motives of a Kingdom Citizen (Matthew 6:1-18)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on July 9, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ “Daddy, watch this! Daddy, look at me!” Those are probably the two most repeated phrases in my house. If you’ve ever had a young child in the home, you know what I mean. I’m constantly being asked to watch a little kid jump off the arm of a couch onto another and then back again. Or to view a cartwheel being attempted over and over again. Or I’m suppose to keep looking at my daughter as she makes funny faces in the mirror.
 - ▶ Watch me! Look at me! That's so natural to children. **Kids have an innate desire to be seen by their parents.** To do whatever it is they do with mom or dad watching.

- ❖ **I think there is something deeply healthy and good about that instinct.** It’s even reflected in our passage today. Last week we looked at Matthew 5:43-48, which ended with an exhortation to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. Disciples of Jesus were reminded both of our status as sons and daughters of God *and* of our responsibility to grow up into his likeness, to resemble his perfect love and righteousness.
 - ▶ And now starting in chapter 6:1-18, we’re told that everything in the Christian life is to be lived out in the sight of the Father. When you give, when you pray, when you fast, or worship or serve – whatever you do – you’re suppose to be like the child. “Heavenly Father, watch this. Heavenly Father, look at me.” **To want God’s eyes on you, as you practice your righteousness, is deeply healthy and good.**
 - But just as any child can twist that good instinct and turn into something self-centered – where you’re just showing off – Christians can make the same twisted mistake. We want to be seen, but it’s not God’s eyes we’re after. We want the eyes of man. There's something twisted in us that wants to show off.

- ❖ I think this morning’s passage is going to be even more difficult than last week’s. **If you thought the command to love your enemy felt like a sledge hammer to the face, then today’s passage is a steamroller.** It’ll flatten you even more. Jesus’s words cut so deep that they expose the root motives of our acts of righteousness, of our religious piety.
 - ▶ What motivates you to give to the poor? What motivates you to pray or fast? You’re doing it to be seen by someone. **There’s no denying that impulse, and there’s no need to resist it. There’s only a need to direct it.** To direct that impulse towards the One person in the universe who matters most.

- ❖ But because we live in a fallen world (in a self-absorbed, narcissistic society) and because all of us are still in the flesh and feeling the sinful effects of the Fall – **we are prone to practicing our righteousness for the eyes and praise of man.**
 - ▶ That’s why Jesus has to warn us to “beware” in chapter 6:1. *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them”*. If we’re not vigilant, if we don’t take the time to examine our motives, our practice of Christianity could very well be driven by a self-serving motive to be seen and praised by others (sometimes without even realizing it).

- ❖ We're going to cover vv1-18 this morning, and I'll let you know up front that we're not going to cover the Lord's Prayer in any depth. I feel bad skimming over the Lord's Prayer, but it would take a whole series to do it justice and we did just that last summer. So if you're interested, you can search for those sermons on our website.
 - ▶ This morning we're going to focus on the three acts of righteousness that Jesus mentions – Christian giving, Christian prayer, and Christian fasting. In each case, his point is simple and similar. **If you're going to give, pray, or fast, then just do it without any showiness or flashiness. Don't do it for the applause of man or even a self-congratulatory pat on the back. Do it for God and for his eyes alone.**

When You Give

- ❖ Jesus's first point in vv2-4 can be put like this. **1) When you give, don't announce it (not even to yourself) – just give.** Look with me at v2, *“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.”*
 - ▶ Here Jesus is referring to the Christian practice of almsgiving. Almsgiving is focused on giving materially to meet the needs of the poor either in your church, in your community, or around the world.
- ❖ **Notice how Jesus simply expects his followers to be giving in this way.** Look back at v2. He said “when you give to the needy” not “if you give”. It's the same as when he says in v5, “when you pray”. I think we all recognize and agree that prayer is an expectation for Christians. So why don't we see almsgiving in the same way? Jesus certainly did. Now he's concerned with our heart motives when we give to the needy, **maybe some of us need to examine our hearts in general and ask why we're not even giving in this way.**
 - ▶ Now if some of you want to give alms but don't know how to do it in a responsible way, then consider giving an offering above your normal tithe and designate it to our church's benevolence fund, which helps people in our church who have legitimate financial needs. Or look on your outline for a list of some of the charitable organizations here in town that our church partners with.
- ❖ **Now for those who regularly give in this way, Jesus's point is that your generosity is not enough if your motives are poor.** There are three motives you could possibly have. You're either 1) Giving openly to be praised by men. 2) Giving in secret but secretly applauding yourself. 3) Giving in secret to please your Father in heaven.
 - ▶ The scribes and Pharisees were definitely driven by the first motive. They blew their trumpets to announce their presence and to draw everyone's eyes their way before dropping their offering into the coffers. **They were literally tooting their own horns.** Jesus says in v2 that they did this to *“be praised by others”*. They were practicing their righteousness *“before other people in order to be seen by them”* (v1).

- ❖ That's the motive that appears in each of these three scenarios. In v5, the Pharisees stand and pray out in the open "*that they may be seen by others*". In v16, they disfigure their faces "*that their fasting may be seen by others*".
 - ▶ It's those two words "*by others*" that are the problem. Like we said earlier, wanting to be seen by your Father in heaven is healthy and good. We were made for that. We were made to be images (Gen. 1:27). **We were created to be mirrors. And there's nothing wrong with a mirror wanting to be seen. That's what it's for.**
 - In the same way, there's nothing wrong with you wanting to be seen, to have eyes on you. The only question is: *Whose eyes? Who do you want to be seen by?* Three times Jesus speaks of "*your Father who sees in secret*" (6:4, 6, 18). Is that enough? Are *his* eyes enough for you? Or do you want more?

- ❖ Apparently the Pharisees wanted more. They wanted to be seen *by others*. They were putting on a performance *for others*. **That's why Jesus describe what they're doing as hypocrisy.** He outright calls them "*hypocrites*" in vv5 and 16. **The Greek word (*hypokrites*) refers to an actor performing for an audience.** In those days, they didn't have makeup artists or special effects, so to play different parts in a play, the same actor – the hypocrite – would put on different masks pretending to be different characters.
 - ▶ It's fine to act a part if you're on a stage. You're not trying to fool anyone. We all know you're playing a part. **But if you do that in church, if you try to play a part here – to take some religious practice like giving, prayer, or fasting and just put it on for theatrical display – then that's religious hypocrisy.** You're practicing your faith seeking the applause and approval of others.
 - And in so doing, you actually wrong them. You're lying to them. You have a mask on. You want them to think you're someone you're not.

- ❖ **I think out of concern for this kind of hypocrisy, many churches (including ours) have avoided the use of an offertory during worship.** You've never seen a collection plate in our church. We just have an offering box in the back and scattered around the building.
 - ▶ **Now I agree there's always a danger of fostering hypocrisy through a public act of giving like an offertory.** But that danger is there in any public act of righteousness like a prayer meeting or when you fast together during Lent or an event like 30-Hour Famine. If we're aware of the dangers of hypocrisy and try to disciple people away from it *while* they participate in the prayer meeting or 30-Hour Famine, then why can't we do the same with an offertory during our worship service?

- ❖ Among us pastors and elders on the English side, **we've been stewing on the idea of incorporating an offertory in this service.** Of course it could facilitate someone's hypocrisy. We would have to always work against that. But an offertory could also help in recovering the worship aspect of giving – that we're giving as an act of worship to God.
 - ▶ **So I don't think Jesus's teaching here would oppose the public collection of an offering.** It just opposes any hypocrisy where you give to deceive others into thinking you're someone you're not. Or maybe you're even deceiving yourself.

- ❖ Like I mentioned, there's a second possible motive here. There are those who are more careful hypocrites. Who don't give or pray or fast in a very open and ostentatious manner. **They practice their righteousness in secret but secretly applaud themselves for doing so.**
 - ▶ That's why Jesus says in v3 to not even "*let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret.*" We're not suppose to tell others about our almsgiving, but in a sense we're not even suppose to tell ourselves. Now don't take that so literally to mean you just blindly grab whatever is in your wallet when a offering plate comes by or blindly write out a check. That makes no sense.

- ❖ What Jesus means here is that you just give generously to the needy and then forget about it. Don't dwell on your generosity. **A Christian's practice of righteousness should be characterized by a healthy dose of self-forgetfulness.** Where you give generously; others never know about it; you eventually forget about it; but God who sees in secret never forgets. And one day you'll stand before him and he'll applaud and approve and say "*Well done, my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master!*" Is that what you seek?

- ❖ **If all you seek is the applause and approval of man, then Jesus says you'll get it.** In each scenario, Jesus says the Pharisees have received what they were after. Look at v2, "*Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.*" (cf. v5 and v16). That word for "*received*" is a technical term in Greek used within commercial transactions. It would've been stamped on an account to say it's been paid in full. It's been received.
 - ▶ **Jesus's point is if you want people to see you as spiritual, then they will.** Do your acts of righteousness for all to see, and they'll think you're spiritual. **You'll get their applause and approval, but that'll be it.** You'll receive all the reward you're going to get. There's nothing more coming. There's no reward to be given on that Last Day.

- ❖ But according to Jesus, a reward is what you should be seeking. He mentions heavenly rewards in v1, v4, v6, v18, and he speaks of storing up "*treasures in heaven*" in v20. **Jesus is definitely presenting rewards as a motivator for our acts of righteousness.** I understand if that doesn't sit right with you – if it feels like that would spoil the very act of giving or praying or fasting. Well it all depends on what reward you're expecting.
 - ▶ **If you give to the needy because you're hoping God will see that and repay you with greater material blessings – if you're just after more treasure on earth – then of course that spoils the act.** The same would apply if you pray or fast with a real mechanistic approach, trying to manipulate God to grant your request.

- ❖ If what you're after is just some gift and not the Giver himself, then Jesus would agree that THAT is not the proper motivation. That's not what he had in mind. **But if you're doing your acts of righteousness out of a desire to please your heavenly Father – because you want him to watch, to smile, to applaud – then that's good.** That's exactly what my daughter wants when she tells me to watch her jump and skip and dance. It's not because she wants money. It's because she loves me and loves the attention and approval I give her as her Father. That's a good thing. And that should be motivating you if God is *your* Father.

- ❖ I want to be very clear here. **You can give like a Christian, pray like a Christian, and fast like a Christian – but none of that makes you a Christian.** A Christian is a sinner who has received Jesus, who believes in him as the One who died on a cross for our sins and rose again to give us new life (a new birth!). A Christian is the one who has received the right to become a child of God – born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of God (cf. Jn. 1:12-13). You're *not* a Christian until you've been converted and adopted into the family of God – where you now give and pray and fast and worship and serve and disciple and outreach all out of a child-like faith that seeks to please your Father in heaven.

When You Pray

- ❖ Now we went into a lot of depth in this first scenario because the motivating principles for giving are going to be the same when it comes to praying and fasting. So we can work through these next two more quickly. Jesus's second point is **2) When you pray, don't make a show of it, just pray.**
 - ▶ Look at v5, *"⁵And 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."*
 - **Again the improper motivation is *not* 'wanting to be seen' but 'wanting to be seen by others' and not your Father.** So Jesus's recommendation is to go into your room, shut the door, and pray in secret where only God can see.
- ❖ Now before we consider the wisdom in that, let's clarify that **Jesus is *not* opposed to praying in public.** There were times in the Gospels where Jesus publicly prayed, purposely in ear shot of others. In the account of raising Lazarus, Jesus prays in John 11 saying, *"Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me."*
 - ▶ **He outright says he's praying out loud for others to hear that it might strengthen their faith.** That should be the very reason why we pray with people in public. If you're doing it because you care for others and you're trying to build up their faith, that's good. But if your real motive is to build up for yourself a reputation of a caring person who prays a lot – then that's the problem Jesus is identifying.
- ❖ So there's nothing wrong with enjoying the opportunity to pray with others in pairs or in groups. **The problem would be if that's really the only time you ever pray.** Do you have a private prayer life?
 - ▶ **That's why Jesus says the best way to test your motives is to consider what you do in secret.** What you do in your room with your door shut. If you can spend a hour in prayer and not tell a soul – where no one knows what you were doing, no one knows you were on your knees praying for them – if you can do that in secret, then you have a better sense of what's motivating your prayer life.

- ❖ But if your instinct is to inform that person or to tweet about it or mention it on Facebook, then there's a problem. Can you do acts of righteousness without ever telling a soul? **And how much of your faith is experienced in this way – in complete privacy?**
 - ▶ Of course the answer shouldn't be 100%. **You can't have a completely private faith.** Otherwise you can't function as salt of the earth or light of the world (5:13, 14). If there's no public component to your faith, then no one can see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (5:16).
 - **But Jesus's concern here is for the disciple who lacks a private devotional life.** Who lacks a personal relationship with God where the reward of prayer is simply the sweet communion you enjoy with your heavenly Father.

- ❖ Now in v7, Jesus goes on to warn against treating prayer like some sort of magical incantation, where you heap up empty phrases, hoping to somehow turn God's hand to give you what you want. But he says in v8 that God's children shouldn't pray like that, *“for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”*
 - ▶ He already knows what you *need*. **He also knows what you want, but more importantly he knows what you need.** And they're often not the same thing. So maybe you're disappointed with God because he doesn't seem to be granting you what you want. **But could you imagine how terrible it would be if God gave us everything we wanted in prayer?**

- ❖ **Parents, what would be the outcome if you just gave your children everything they wanted?** They'd probably be in the hospital and you'd probably be in jail. That's why we prioritize our kids' needs over their wants. That makes complete sense to us, but then when it comes to our relationship with God, we seem to forget. **But here we're reminded that we have an all-seeing, all-knowing Father in Heaven who will meet our every need.** He'll give us our daily bread (v11) He'll accomplish his will on earth as it is in heaven in order to hallow his name. You can be sure of it as you pray for it.

When You Fast

- ❖ Lastly, Jesus moves on in v16 to the third scenario and his point is **3) When you fast, don't make a big deal of it, just fast.** *“¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that 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.”*

- ❖ Now the Pharisees were known back then to fast twice a week (cf. Lk. 18:12). And John the Baptist's disciples fasted regularly (cf. Mt. 9:14). **And I'd argue that Jesus expected his followers to fast – as much as he expected them to give or pray.** There are no instructions on the frequency of it, but in v16 he just assumes you do it – *when* you fast.

- ❖ Nowadays we speak of fasting from Netflix or your smartphone or from eating meat or drinking soda. **But the biblical concept of fasting is a voluntary abstinence from food for a designated period of time.** Even if it's just for one meal, that's still a fast.
 - ▶ The Pharisees apparently made a big deal of it. They would disfigure their faces, maybe smear ashes all over their face or purposely neglect personal hygiene in order to make it obvious they're fasting. They want you to know how much they're suffering. Jesus says don't do that. Don't draw attention to yourself. Brush your hair and wash your face so as to not make it obvious. Who are you doing it for and why?
 - Again it's all about testing our motives. **There are a lot of bad reasons to fast but also a lot of good biblical reasons.** If you're doing it to impress others or to come across as spiritual, then those are obviously bad motives. The same goes if your idea of fasting is just a spiritualized form of dieting.

- ❖ So what are good biblical reasons? **In the Bible we see people fasting to express their godly sorrow over sin.** When Nehemiah called the Israelites to corporately grieve and confess their sins, he also called for a fast (Neh. 9:1-2). The people of Nineveh fasted as an expression of their repentance after hearing Jonah's warning (Jon. 3:5). **So some Christians fast – not as a form of self-inflicted punishment for your sin – but as a way to grieve your sin, as a way to show your repentance.** That's a solid biblical reason to fast.

- ❖ **We also see in Scripture people tying their fasting with prayer, especially when faced with a special task or big decision.** Before Esther dare approach the king, she asked her fellow Jews to fast and pray for her (Est. 4:16). Jesus began his public ministry, he fasted and prayed for forty days in the wilderness (Mt. 4:1-2). The church of Antioch fasted and laid hands on Paul and Barnabas before their first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). And before appointing elders in the churches they planted, it says they fasted and prayed (Acts 14:23).
 - ▶ **So there's a solid pattern of fasting when you're seeking God in prayer during unique trials or times of decision.** Now if you think that, by putting yourself through the misery of hunger, that somehow it'll increase the likelihood of God answering prayer the way you like, then you're badly mistaken.
 - But if you fast because you plan to dedicate that hour you would've spent eating lunch to the task of praying or if you let your hunger pains throughout the day serve as reminders to stop and pray – you're fasting for good reason. **If you're basically training your soul to hunger for prayer as much as you hunger for food, then you've got the right motives.**

- ❖ So what's motivating you to fast or pray or give to the needy? Or for some of you the better question is: What's preventing you from doing any of that? I want to issue a challenge. **Will you dedicate time this week to fast from at least one meal (but ideally three in a row)?** Dedicate those meal times to Bible reading and **prayer**. And take the money you would've spent on food and **donate** it to a charitable organization that's helping the poor. **And then see if you can do all that without ever telling a soul.** Don't give me or your small group an update. Just do it in complete secret and let your Heavenly Father alone see you.