

This Present Kingdom
Week 6 - Kingdom Righteousness
Matthew 6:1-8

Jesus continues to indict the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy and lack of true righteousness. The Lord turns His attention to giving alms to the poor (6:1-4), prayer (6:5-7), and fasting (6:16-18). For our study today we will be looking at the first two. These were important disciplines in Judaism. Jesus cautions His children to guard their motivation and manner in which these were done. All three of these areas can easily be sullied by engaging in these practices as mere religious works, a practice which indicates impure motives and will merit no eternal reward.

“What starts out as a *desire* to be all that God wants us to be can degenerate into a *duty*; and what degenerates into a duty can soon degenerate further into an empty *display*. That is what had happened to the Pharisees” (John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary (Matthew 6:1–4)*).

As Jesus begins to address the good works that will naturally emanate out of a changed heart, He warns His followers against “practicing acts of righteousness before men to be noticed by them” (Matthew 6:1) resulting in the loss of heavenly rewards from the Father. In his commentary on Matthew, S. Weber explains:

We must recognize, however, that the line between right and wrong motives is not the same as that between private and public obedience. Not all public acts of obedience are done for the wrong motives. Jesus has already commanded us, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father who is in Heaven” (5:16). We are actually commanded to perform righteous acts of obedience before others. The difference is in whom others see as a result of our public righteousness. Do they see only us, or do they see our Father more clearly? (p. 78).

Our public life is to flow out of our private devotion—all to the glory of God the Father!

I. The Sacred Practice of Giving - Matthew 6:1-4

The Pharisees used almsgiving as an attempt to gain favor with God and to garner attention and praise from men. John Stott observes,

The Greek word for almsgiving, as we have seen, indicates that it is a work of mercy. Yet it is possible to turn an act of mercy into an act of vanity, so that our principal motive in giving is not the benefit of the person receiving the gift but our own benefit who give it (*The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 130).

Jesus refers to Pharisees and anyone who gives with self-serving motives as hypocrites. John MacArthur notes: “A *hypokritēs* (**hypocrite**) originally was a Greek actor who wore a mask that portrayed in an exaggerated way the role that was being dramatized. For obvious reasons the term came to be used of anyone who pretended to be what he was not” (*Matthew*, p. 354).

A ravenous hunger for the praise for men was the besetting sin of the Pharisees who liked “to sound a trumpet” (Matthew 6:2) when they brought their special offerings for the poor. Their giving was often accompanied by so much fanfare that it turned into a grand spectacle. Jesus pictures a pompous Pharisee on the way to bring his gift for the poor to the temple or synagogue. He is preceded by a troop of marching trumpeters, blowing a fanfare as they walk. Whether Pharisees sometimes did this or whether Jesus was painting an amusing caricature does not really matter. However it was being made, their insatiable appetite for human commendation spoiled their gift. Spurgeon put it this way, “To stand with a penny in one hand and a trumpet in the other is the posture of hypocrisy” (*The Gospel of the Kingdom*, p. 32).

Since the beginning of time there have been hypocrites. Cain, King David’s son Absalom, Judas Iscariot (the supreme example of a hypocrite), Ananias and Sapphira—just to name a few, are all Biblical examples of hypocrites. The plague of hypocrisy is gravely dangerous. In his commentary on Matthew, John MacArthur warns:

One of Satan’s most common and effective ways of undermining the power of the church is through hypocrisy. Hypocrisy, therefore, is a great peril to the church, and it comes in two forms. The first is that of nonbelievers masquerading as Christians. The second is that of true believers who are sinful but pretend to be spiritual. The warning Jesus gives here applies to both groups (pp. 354-355).

Obviously, there are hypocrites in the church today. And, I dare say, the spirit of hypocrisy rears its ugly head from time to time in the heart of every believer. We must continually be on guard lest the besetting sin of the Pharisees be resurrected in us through our flesh. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Self-centeredness belongs to the old life; the new life in Christ is one of uncalculating generosity” (p. 144). Sisters, we have been warned!

Jesus says, “When you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matthew 6:3). This was possibly a well-known proverbial expression meaning to do something spontaneously with no special effort or show. The right hand was considered to be the primary hand of action, so much so that often the left hand would not be engaged in completing certain tasks. That is the idea here. Giving to help those in need should be a normal response for the Christian to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, done simply, directly and as discreetly as possible.

Jesus reminds His followers that ultimately God is the record-keeper and giver of rewards. Hebrews 6:10 says, “For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.” There is great reward in the knowledge we have obeyed and our obedience pleases our Lord. Furthermore, we can rest assured we will be granted eternal rewards which we will cast at the feet of the Savior. We will add our voices to those of the twenty-four elders declaring, “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God” (Revelation 4:11). This disruptive slant to giving was radical in the hearing of those gathered on the side of the mountain and still challenges us today!

II. The Secret Place of Prayer - Matthew 6:5-8

Jesus moves to the issue of prayer. Again, He contrasts the hypocrite with the genuine Christ-follower. The hypocrite prays to be seen of men while the believer comes to the throne of grace to meet with the Father. None of us can fully comprehend or explain how prayer works within the infinite mind and plan of God. We do know that God commands, even as He invites us, to come to Him in prayer. We are urged to pray for wisdom, direction, provision, protection, forgiveness, and countless other needs. Prayer is one of the great mysteries of the faith but one we dare not neglect.

Faithful first-century Jews regularly engaged in prayer, keeping to a schedule of three times a day (9:00 a.m., 12:00 noon, and 3:00 p.m. according to the Palestinian mode of time). According to the Jewish custom of the day, prayers were often made while standing, and to be seen praying in public was not unusual. Should the appointed prayer time happen while a devout Jew was out in the market place, he stopped and offered the appropriate prayers. Jesus addresses the heart condition of such modes of praying and uncovers the true motive of the hypocritical Pharisee—"to be seen of men" (Matthew 6:5). This holy habit had dissolved into a ritual of repeating memorized prayers rather than bringing one's petition and praise before the Throne of God. Jesus calls His followers to come into the secret place of prayer. In his book, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, John Stott describes this further,

Then, Jesus went on, your Father who sees in secret will reward you. R. V. G. Tasker points out that the Greek word for the 'room' into which we are to withdraw to pray (tameion) "was used for the store-room where treasures might be kept". The implication may be, then, that "there are treasures already awaiting" us when we pray (From R. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, p. 73). Certainly the hidden rewards of prayer are too many to enumerate. In words of the apostle Paul, when we cry, "Abba, Father," the Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are indeed God's children, and we are granted a strong assurance of his fatherhood and love. He lifts the light of his face upon us and gives us his peace. He refreshes our soul, satisfies our hunger, quenches our thirst. We know we are no longer orphans for the Father has adopted us; no longer prodigals for we have been forgiven; no longer alienated, for we have come home (p. 134).

Many pious Jews had added meaningless repetitions, patterned after pagan religions, to their prayer time. Excessive words lengthened the prayers and increased the chance of being seen and assessed to be extremely spiritual. Jesus says this kind of prayer reveals a wrong heart attitude and has no place in Kingdom living. In John MacArthur's words:

To pray rightly is to pray with a devout heart and with pure motives. It is to pray with single attention to God rather than to other men. And it is to pray with sincere confidence that our heavenly Father both hears and answers every request made to Him in faith. He always repays our sincere devotion with gracious response. If our request is sincere but not according to His will, He will answer in a way better than we want or expect. But He will always answer (p. 370).

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus points to the condition of the heart. A changed heart will produce a transformed life. By and large, the scribes and Pharisees were advocating legalism, that is conforming the outward behavior to a list of rules as the means of gaining righteousness without addressing the sinful condition of the heart. Jesus condemns all work-based righteousness and brands it as hypocritical. Beware of replacing a relationship with Jesus that is FAITH-BASED with a religion that is WORK-BASED.

Jesus is calling us to a crucified life, “dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11). Paul penned, “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service (“reasonable service”, KJV) of worship.” In her book, *Altar’d*, Jennifer Kennedy Dean explains it this way,

The noun altar is usually understood to be a place of worshipful offering. Something of value is offered up and released on the *altar*. The offerer relinquishes ownership and builds control to Another—a Power beyond.

Let’s see what happens when we turn the noun *altar* into a verb. Altar our fear, our future, our possessiveness, our need to control . . . all those things that hold us captive and keep us from running the race at full throttle.

Live in an *altar’d* state. Surrendered, yielded . . . free. Not offering sacrifice to appease a god who is vengeful; or to placate a god who is withholding; or to win the approval of a god who is angry. Live in an *altar’d* state to cooperate with the God who is committed to seeing you free of the toxic flesh that works against your freedom. Let the altar do its work in you, transforming fear to faith, worry to worship.

Each time that old pattern starts asserting itself in your thoughts, overlay it with the new reality: I’m *altar’d*.

On the altar, flesh is surrendered to crucifixion. Crucifixion is the prelude to resurrection. *Altar’d* living frees us to live in the power of His resurrection (p. 12).

Beloved, we are called to live ***altar’d***, to live an inner-directed life for the **Audience of One**. This is the disruptive message of the Sermon on the Mount for those living in *This Present Kingdom!*

The Spiritual Discipline of Giving

“As I think about giving, I cannot think of a more impactful way to give than to offer myself wholly to my Creator, the Author and Perfecter of my faith, the Lover of my soul. Not only will He reward me for what is done in the secret place, but He will assuredly reveal new ways about how I can give to others so that His name is glorified.” (*This Present Kingdom*, p. 142).