

## Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-18 Kingdom Piety 1

### Introduction

Welcome back to Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount. I have been away from this podcast for almost two years. That was not my plan. I do apologize. I am sorry for the long gap. A lot of things happened in life and ministry that kept me away. Chapter 5 did make a reasonable stopping place, but I really wanted to get back to this study and finish the whole sermon. I appreciate very much that you have come back, too. Or if you are just starting, then welcome to the study. We have five more lessons to finish. Those lessons will be released every two weeks. And just to let you know, I have also begun preparing for the next series, which is going to be, "Interpreting Revelation," and that series will start coming out every two weeks after we've completed the Sermon on the Mount.

We are starting in this lesson, the second major section in the body of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon started with a two-part introduction that I called Kingdom Values, which lead to a place of humble submission, poor in spirit, mourning, meek, thirsting after righteousness; and also gave us a high calling to be salt and light, witnesses to the glory of God. Following that introduction Jesus gave us a series of commandments about righteousness. I called that section, Kingdom Commandments. And now there is a clear change in the Sermon's structure at the end of chapter 5. Jesus stops addressing various commandments with the pattern, "You have heard it said... but I say to you." He did that six times, ending with, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Now, in chapter 6 Jesus is going to pick up a new pattern as He's addressing the spiritual disciplines of giving, prayer and fasting. Before I move into the particulars of this next section, I want to step back and observe the flow of thought. There are some valuable insights in getting a sense of the movement from the second half of chapter 5 to the first half of chapter 6. What is similar between the two sections and what is different? What is the movement of thought? What Jesus is doing here from a big picture view is just as interesting as what He is doing in the details. It is pure genius. Of course it is. He is God. Since I am not a genius, I am sure I am just scratching the surface. But one of the wonderful aspects of His genius is, that Jesus communicates with simplicity and depth at the same time, so there's always something we can understand and take away, but we also know we can continually go deeper over time.

So, starting with the big picture flow of thought at this transition point between chapters 5 and 6: what similarities exist between the two chapters and what differences?

*Transition Similarity: Righteousness and the bankruptcy of human religion*

The word, righteousness, is our first similarity, connecting these two sections. In chapter 5 verse 20, Jesus challenged his audience this way, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Jesus then went on to describe this higher standard of righteousness, requiring not only outward obedience, but full obedience of heart, mind, and soul. Referencing the fundamental idea of the moral law in Leviticus, that God's people should be holy because God Himself is holy, Jesus ended the section with that incredibly high moral bar that we are simply to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (5:48). This is the righteousness that merits entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

This next section of the Sermon beginning in chapter 6 opens with this verse, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them." In chapter 5, Jesus attacked human religion by showing how absurdly low the human standard of righteousness is set, in contrast to the true standard of righteousness that flows from God's character. Now in chapter 6, Jesus is going to expose the hypocritical tendency of human religion to corrupt spiritual practices which were originally intended to express love and devotion to God. And to make His point about corrupted spiritual practice, Jesus is going to use the three examples of giving, prayer, and fasting.

So, chapter 5 and chapter 6 are connected in that we are still talking about righteousness, specifically the failure of human religion to produce the kind of righteousness that pleases God. There is another way that these two sections connect. In the previous section, Jesus demolished the idea that human

beings can live up to a true standard of righteousness, by drilling into the moral foundation of the Ten Commandments. Jesus continues to address the true intent of the Ten Commandments through chapter 6, so in our section and on.

That is not to say that Jesus is stepping through each of the Ten Commandments, directly addressing each one. He is delving into the heart of various commandments, moving past the outer, civil code of, “do not murder,” or, “do not commit adultery,” to the moral vision that lies behind the Commandments. Much of Mosaic Law was provided as civil code intended to simply minimize the damage that human beings inflict on one another in society. To not murder is not at all the height of righteousness. It is a bare minimum: you know, just don’t kill people. The deeper moral principles of the Mosaic Law can be missed, because it does include some of civil and ceremonial law. But this deeper, heart-level law is there. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” That incredibly high standard is in Deuteronomy 6:4. There is also in Leviticus 19:18, a second commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If that one was not hard enough, it gets developed later in the same chapter, Leviticus 19:34, as, “The foreigner who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself.” Love God. Love your neighbor. Love the foreigner. From your heart, all the time, with your words, in practical action. So Jesus is developing for us the moral heart of Old Covenant Law. “You shall not murder” is only the extreme side of a moral continuum that can be understood as, “Do not despise another human being. Do not take life. Instead, value every human being. Give life.” That continuum begins with the extreme negative of actual murder, but moving along includes not striking another human being, not taking life with words such as, “fool,” or, “idiot,” to not hating in your heart. The continuum does not end with forbidding the negative, but moves on to doing the positive. We should value others in heart and mind. We should speak words of truth, and life, and encouragement. We should commit acts of love and care; maybe even lay down our own life as the extreme on the positive side of the continuum. Moses said that this applies to our neighbor, and foreigners living among us are to be treated with respect as our neighbors. But in this Sermon, Jesus takes it beyond neighbor to include every single human being you ever meet, when He concludes in 5:44, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Jesus then directly addressed the commandment, “You shall not commit adultery.” And he indirectly addressed the commandment, “You shall not steal” in teaching on giving and going the extra mile. “Give” is the positive opposite of, “do not steal.” Jesus teaching on vows addressed the commandment, “You shall not bear false witness.” And all of these addressed the idea of coveting, a central motive behind so much murder, and adultery, and theft. You know, we desire what is not ours. By the end of chapter 5, with the moral bar set so high, Jesus has prepared us to consider again the beatitudes that He communicated in the introduction of the Sermon. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” You know, we get it now. Human self-righteousness is so very poor. So very unable to produce the kind of true righteousness that pleases the heart and mind of God. There is no way we can live up to the Ten Commandments if we understand the moral principle of the Ten Commandments, how they flow out of God’s heart fully, the whole continuum. And because I am poor in spirit, I mourn. And mourning leads me to humility or meekness as I present myself, poor in spirit before God. I hunger and thirst after righteousness, but apart from His grace to forgive me and apart from His grace to change my heart, I cannot even begin to pretend to be good. We begin to hear the gospel of grace in the beatitudes, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.” But Jesus is not going to explain how that works in this Sermon. Nor is he going to explain how we’re empowered by grace through the Holy Spirit. That comes later. Think of His final words to His disciples the night of his arrest recorded for us in John 13-17. That’s a later sermon, it’s not this Sermon.

This Sermon is showing us the bankruptcy of self-righteous human religion. And it’s targeting directly the Judaism of Jesus’ day, and the most serious proponents of that system, the Pharisees. If that system cannot begin to provide those most ardent adherents with an acceptable status in the

Kingdom, then who can it save? Jesus details for us the true standard of righteousness that pleases God - and then He sets us free from that standard. Yes, you are poor in spirit. But knowing that, it is still possible to inherit the Kingdom of God. It is not going to be by living up to the standard. It must be a gift of grace and mercy, because you are poor in spirit. Set free from the standard we could never meet, we have this new relationship to righteousness. It's not a standard over us. We pursue that same righteousness. We're not going after a lesser righteousness. We are pursuing that same righteousness as a vision of what is truly good and life-giving. We can now strive towards that picture of who Jesus is without pride that we have already arrived, and without fear that we never will.

This is how chapter 5 and chapter 6 are similar. Both address righteousness. Both are going to deal with the Ten Commandments. And both refute the claim that a human religious system, even a human religious system based on the Bible, can enable anyone to achieve the Kingdom of Heaven through their own merit.

*Transition Difference: Shift from Love your neighbor to love your God*

Now, let's notice a difference between chapters 5 and 6. All the commandments addressed in chapter 5 come from the second half of the Ten Commandments, starting with the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, "Do not murder," and so on. These commandments are summed up by the second great commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus did not start His rebuke of human religion in chapter 5 with the 1<sup>st</sup> commandment, "You shall have no other God's before me." He started with the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, "You shall not murder." He chose to start with, "love your neighbor," instead of starting with, "love your God."

That's very interesting to me. Loving God is certainly more fundamental than loving your neighbor. But I think we see something important in Jesus' strategy of starting with, "love your neighbor." If you want to challenge religious people who think they are already right with God – so whether we're addressing the religious system Jesus was facing in Judaism, or any strong religious system, do not start by challenging your audience with their self-perceived love for God. Start by challenging their love for people. Self-righteousness people struggle to love other people well, especially other people who are not part of their particular religious circle. This is a heart check for all of us. If I claim to love God, can I say that I love the people God loves? And do I love them like God loves them? If I really have a heart for God and am in intimate relationship with God, won't my heart be softened for others just by spending time with Him? What does that say about me if my heart is not soft towards others?

Jesus, having completed this challenge to love the neighbor in chapter 5 and showed us how much we don't live up to the standard, He is now ready to address love for God in chapter 6. Jesus does not explicitly refer to any of the Ten Commandments in chapter 6. But love for God alone, not making idols, not taking the Lord's name in vain, and sabbath rest all lie just below the surface as we move through the content of chapter 6.

The commandment in the background at the starting point of chapter 6 is the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment. "You shall not take the name of your Lord God in vain." That is a commandment about spiritual practices like prayer. It's not a commandment about cussing. It's a commandment about not using the name of your God to promote your own self-interest. It's telling us, "You can't invoke God's name to get what you want." Prayer is not about you. Prayer is about God and your personal relationship with God. Do not use His name in a vain and empty way.

All religions have practices intended to promote relationship with god. Jesus is going to challenge us with the question, "Are your religious practices really enhancing your relationship with God?"

We should come away from our consideration of Matthew 6:1-18 thinking, "When I pray, when I study my Bible, when I attend church, when I sing praise songs, when I fast, when I give, when I go on a spiritual retreat, what is my motive? What am I really pursuing during these practices? What is the result of my pursuit? "

I am calling this section in Matthew 6:1-18, “Kingdom Piety.” We’re going to address it in two lessons. Piety has a negative connotation for some and a positive connotation for others. I’m using the term neutrally, with the sense that piety is participation in spiritual practices as a way of showing devotion to God. When Mary poured a year’s worth of perfume on the feet of Jesus, that was an act of piety, or devotion. When Judas objects that the money could have been used for the poor, that was meant to sound pious. The heart motive really matters when we are talking about piety. And the heart motive is often revealed in how we practice our acts of piety.

Acts of devotion done out of the flesh with wrong motives are sinful. That is smelly piety, stinking offerings. Jesus does not reject acts of devotion here. He is going to say something about the wrong way of engaging in acts of piety, and the right way of engaging in acts of piety. How do we avoid the danger of self-righteousness piety, so natural to our human flesh? How do we engage in spiritual practices in a way that honors God and what does good, true, loving Kingdom piety look like?

#### *Forecast*

Jesus employs a strong parallel structure for this section of the Sermon. The first verse 6:1 gives us the main principle. Then Jesus applies this principle to the examples of giving, praying, and fasting with parallel, repetitive language. The only non-parallel text comes when Jesus develops the example of prayer with a considerable amount of extra material. I am going to cover this section in two episodes because of that extra material on prayer. In this lesson, I will start with Jesus’ main principle regarding acts of piety, and then address the parallel text in the three examples of application: giving, prayer, and fasting. All of that material is in verses 1-6 and then 16-18. I’m going to come back in next lesson to the extended development of prayer that Jesus gives in verses 7-15.

### **I. The Principle (6:1)**

Starting with Matthew 6:1, here is the main principle.

<sup>1</sup> “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

There is a textual issue to clear up right away. This won’t matter to you at all if it doesn’t appear in your Bible. But if it does appear, it would be nice to understand why my Bible is different. Some early Greek manuscripts have the word, “alms,” in place of, “righteousness.” So you get this, “Take heed not to do your alms before men.” Or maybe, “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men.” If those manuscripts are correct, then 6:1 introduces the main principle in concrete terms of the first example of giving.

The translation I am using has the Greek word for, “righteousness,” so it is not “beware of doing alms before men,” but, “beware of practicing your righteousness before men.” This seems like a better choice to me as the original text. It makes a connection back to the previous section with Jesus’ statement in 5:20 that our righteousness be higher than the Pharisees and provides a more abstract principle that will be clarified with the three practical examples of doing righteousness, giving, prayer, and fasting. And as we see in the later structure, giving, prayer, and fasting are very well balanced.

D. A. Carson explains in his commentary how “alms” probably made its way into some early manuscripts. Scribes would sometimes make notes on the side of a text, in the margin. Those were called, “a marginal gloss.” The Greek Septuagint often used the Greek word, “alms,” as a translation for the Hebrew word for righteousness. Quite possibly some scribe had put a note in the margin concerning the word, “alms,” that a later copyist inserted into the actual text.<sup>1</sup> And that sometimes happened. Sometimes it happened subconsciously, sometimes consciously – we can’t know. This is

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson. *Matthew in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8), F. E. Gaebelein (Ed.). (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984) 163.

not a critical issue for our interpretation, but if your Bible translation has “alms,” I wanted you to know why the one I am using has “righteousness.”

Back to the text. “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them...” Hm. Don’t be seen. And yet, in the introduction of the Sermon on the Mount, right after the beatitudes, Jesus said, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” I love that. 5:16, “Do good so that you will be seen.” 6:1, “Don’t do good so that you will be seen.” The tension in those two statements alerts us to the fact that “being seen doing good” has some complexity to it. Okay. The seemingly opposing exhortations force us to use our minds, to reflect, and ask, “Okay, what’s the difference in the two that makes being seen, positive on the one hand and being seen, negative on the other hand?”

One difference is that the good to be seen that Jesus elaborates in chapter 5 is the good of loving people. Let people see you loving your enemy, telling the truth, refusing to respond to those who try and shame you, resisting outbursts of hate, caring for those in need. You are going to be seen in how you treat other people in public. You have a public life. You’re going to be seen. You can’t help that. So, in public, in relationships with people, where you are by definition going to be seen, be seen doing good. Be seen reflecting the character of your Father in Heaven. But giving, fasting, praying, acts of devotion like these - we don’t need to see them.

Do you want to display God in you, God through you? Very good. But there is a danger. When you do good, the praise may not go to God. The praise may go to you. You walked the extra mile. You gave to the needy. You held back when wrongly accused. You showed kindness. You sought the good of someone who wronged you. And some people around you, some Christians and some non-Christians, will find your behavior admirable. Your Sunday School teacher will be proud of you. A neighbor will admire you. You will receive encouragement and respect from some.

That’s all good. Encouragement is good. Keep doing what you’re doing. But what your heart is going to be tempted to do is not good. Part of you is going to feed off that praise and admiration. Part of you is going to take credit. You are going to forget that on your own you are poor in spirit. You are going to interpret the esteem of others as the source of your value. When we are praised for doing good things, our sin nature processes that praise in a sinful way.

Jesus is doing more than one thing at the same time here. He has moved on from giving us a righteous vision for loving people to now giving us a righteous vision for loving God. And while He’s doing that, He is addressing the temptation of the heart to base our self-worth on the praise we receive when we do good.

<sup>1</sup> “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

So while He’s talking about acts that show love to God, Jesus is addressing here the issue of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is fundamentally about being seen without truly being seen, and being happy about that. The word, “hypocrisy,” comes from the Greek word for, “actor.” It is someone who wears a mask and plays a part. The hypocrite wants to be seen, but seen in a certain light, a certain way. Not seen genuinely, not to really show who they are deep down inside. And even people who are so genuine are so tempted to wear a mask about what they are genuine and honest and open about.

Now, there is a hard core hypocrisy, and then a maybe more normal hypocrisy. Hard core hypocrisy knowingly fakes religious observance to get something. The hard core hypocrite is comfortable living one way around religious people very knowingly, and a very different way when not seen by religious people. They are out for money, or praise, or position, or self-satisfaction. They don’t really care about the religious things they’re doing. They are superior in their knowledge. Maybe they have an inner circle that they share that they’re pulling it over on the religious people, while outwardly pretending to go along.

This is hard core hypocrisy and, as cynical as you might want to be, most religious people are not this. But there is a whole continuum of hypocrisy and there are more subtle forms. The human heart is

hypocritical by nature. We don't have to work hard to be hypocritical. Immediately after they sinned, Adam and Eve instinctively covered their nakedness, lied about their sin, and blamed someone else. "It was not me Lord, but the women you gave me..." Immediately, Adam and Eve tried to control how they were seen. You know, talk about image management. This is not new in our day. This is from the beginning.

New believers quickly learn that Christians don't lust. Christians don't use bad language. Christians hold this political position or that political position. Christians carry this kind of Bible. Christians worship this way. Christians pray that way. Christians don't fail. Or if they do fail, there are certain sins that Christians empathize with, and other sins that Christians judge with harsh condemnation. Christian community is also human community and as such, it trains new believers to be hypocrites. It is an unavoidable temptation. It just kind of happens. It can only be resisted we admit it, and address it openly and directly. Christian community introduces new believers to this significant tension of wanting to be seen, and accepted; you know, they're starting to taste love and community. But at the same time they want it, they don't want to be truly seen because they don't want to be rejected. And so, like Adam and Eve, we learn to wear a mask.

The process is perhaps more ingrained for those who grow up in church. Christian kids learn what kind of behavior is accepted and what kind of behavior is not accepted. But it is much easier to disciple a child's behavior than it is to disciple a child's heart.

The temptation to this kind of hypocrisy is continual through the Christian life. And maybe at some point along the way we find ourselves in a small group, where we could be open and honest about our sin, where we learned to walk with God and in fellowship with other believers. We mature. And we move on. We get a new job in a new city. We get married. We have children. We become older singles. We experience new failures, new stresses, new temptations. And somewhere along the way, we begin to rely on our past relationship with God. We wear the mask of past success without noticing that our present relationship with God has grown cold. There are a lot of subtle forms of hypocrisy.

Maybe we got appointed to be an elder, sent as a missionary, made a worship leader, entrusted to teach Sunday School. And what started with a good desire to love others from the humility of one who knows he is poor in spirit, over time turned into the self-righteous pride. Given a role, given responsibility, we don't feel we can fail. There's even less permission to show weakness. Or we learn what weakness to show. We're going to model weakness to our followers. But we're only going to model a certain kind of weakness, because there are other things we're just not going to admit to anyone. And we learn it's not safe, because even if we do admit it, you know, it'll be taken and used against us.

Hypocrisy is a subtle sin that comes in a lot of forms. We hide out of fear. We hide out of pride. We are constantly tempted to control how we are seen. And when we do, we lose the reward.

<sup>1</sup> "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

That's interesting. I would think the right way of practicing acts of devotion would be to practice those acts with no desire for a reward. But this principle from Jesus makes it sound like the desire for a reward is not a problem. In fact, it sounds like we should be motivated by reward and the problem is desiring the wrong reward.

How do we rightly understand Jesus' warning against hypocrisy? How do we rightly love God through acts of piety or devotion? Jesus is going to explain this principle, this important principle for the Christian life, with three parallel examples. I'm going to address this principle applied to all three examples, side by side.

## II. The Principle Applied (6:2-6 and 16-18)

The application of the principle is in 6:2-6 and 16-18. The middle of the passage gives us extra teaching on prayer. That is in Matthew 6:7-15. I'm going to read the base material for giving and prayer in verses 2-6, then I'm going to jump over the additional prayer material to read the base example for fasting in 16-18.

This is Matthew 6:2-6 and 16-18. Listen for the repetition.

<sup>2</sup> "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. <sup>3</sup> "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup> "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. <sup>6</sup> "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you.

<sup>16</sup> "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites *do*, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. <sup>17</sup> "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face <sup>18</sup> so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you.

Each of the three examples contains two parts. The first part is what we are not to do. The second part is what we are to do. The "do not" part of each example contains both a description of the behavior we are not to do, and the reward received for such behavior. In the same way, the "do" part of each example has a description of the behavior we are to do, and the reward for such behavior.

### 1. "Do not..."

- a. Here are the three descriptions of what we are not to do. I will read all again three so that you get the ideas that are repeated. This is just the description of the "do not."

"So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men (6:2a)."

"When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men (6:5a)."

"Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites *do*, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting (6:16a)."

Each example describes behavior and motive. The religious person is tempted to practice acts of devotion in a way that they will be noticed by people. They want to be honored when they give. They want to be seen when they pray. They want to be noticed when they fast. Honored, seen, noticed.

Its odd how powerful the recognition of people can be. In one sense, there is something wholesome about the desire to be seen. "Daddy, daddy, daddy, watch this! Daddy, daddy, look at me!" We want to be seen, noticed, honored. This can be a right desire of relationship. A desire for accurate validation from someone who knows us truly, who can tell us, "well done."

I want to be told, "well done." I want to be told that I have worth, that I am valuable, I matter. But I want to hear those words so much that the hearing of the words is more important than the truthfulness of the words. The key is to get people to think that I am good, so that they will tell me and, preferably, tell others that I am good.

Think about how social media often works. Facebook, one of the first major social media platforms, played on this desire to be seen. It is in the name. Face – book. I put my face out there for you to see. Do you see me? Do you see how I work? Do you see how I vacation? Do you see how I party? Do you see all my cool hobbies? Do you honor me? Do you notice me? Then let me know. Give me a heart. Give me a smile. Give me a thumbs up. And when that works, I learn to control what you see to control my image to get the response that makes me feel good.

This subtle motive of the hypocrite seeps into our acts of worship and devotion. If we are approved for holding our hands up in worship, we are tempted to hold our hands up in worship. If we are disapproved for holding our hands up in worship, we are tempted to not hold our hands up in worship. We learn the right mode of prayer, the right way to confess sin, the right way to give because we, honestly, care about being seen, noticed, honored.

And if we become quite good at doing our spiritual practices in the way that gains honor in our particular community, we are in danger of falling into the trap of superiority. We actually start to believe that we are spiritual, that we love God. The proof is in the honor we receive. We are treated as spiritual, so we believe we are spiritual. We may have been poor in spirit. Now we are rich in spirit. We pray well. We give generously. We fast somberly. We study the Bible regularly. We worship intensely. We are seen, noticed and honored. There must be something real about our spiritual abilities. We begin to be tempted to feel superior in our spiritual practices, which can oddly makes us feel superior in other areas of life. I feel superior in morality, in wisdom, in intellect, in love for God simply because I am good at the outward form of religious words and behavior.

And then, there is also the opposite problem. Driven by the desire to be seen, noticed, honored, what happens when I am not seen, not noticed, not honored? I am tempted to feel like a failure; I am tempted to be bitter when I do not receive affirmation.

- b. Jesus told us what not to do. Do not give, pray and fast to be seen, noticed, honored by people. And for each one Jesus makes a statement about the reward of such behavior. He emphasized His point by using the exact same words in each case.

“Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full (6:2b).”

“Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full (6:5b).”

“Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full (6:16b).”

This is the reward for this kind of behavior. The religious person wants to be noticed. They want to be honored. They want to be seen. Even if it is false, or partly false. That’s what they want. To be told they are good based on keeping the outward form of devotional practices. They want to be told they are worthy. For others to think of them as religious and spiritual. That’s what they want and to the degree that they succeed, that will be the only reward, the only outcome, the only benefit of their giving, and praying, and fasting. Praise from men is what you want. Praise from men is what you get. But only that. You have your reward in full.

Should we, then, stop with all these pious practices? No. Jesus tells us what not to do. He also tells us what to do.

## 2. “Do...”

- a. Each example, includes a contrasting “But...” Do not do this, but do this. Here are the three examples of what we are to do.

“But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret...(3-4a)”

“But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret...(6a)”

“But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret...(17-18a)

Not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing, is an artistic way of making the simple point not to let anyone know that you are giving. When you pray, go in to your room. Close the door. That’s also about not being seen by other people. It is just between you and God. As with the fasting, anoint your head. Wash your face. Your fast is for God. Other people do not need to know you are fasting.

All three examples have to do with our personal relationship with God. The emphasis is not on what you are doing for people or what you are doing as a community. The emphasis is on you as an individual and your personal spiritual interaction with your heavenly Father.

There is a definite aspect of giving that is about loving your neighbor. That was emphasized in chapter 5, “Give to him who asks of you.” Giving is also a way that we love God. In our giving, we say to God, “You have given me everything. In gratitude and wonder, I give back to you. I love you. I trust you to provide for me. I want to be giving like you are giving.”

The emphasis on individual behavior here does not mean that these behaviors can only be done in secret. There are positive aspects to spiritual practices within a community, and positive aspects to spiritual practices on our own. The way you go about your individual spiritual practices can say a lot about your corporate spiritual practices.

Jesus is not saying that we should not give money when an offering plate is passed around in church. But you do want to watch your heart and make sure you are not making a show of it. And if you are giving in a way that people might notice, are you also giving in ways that no one notices?

Similarly with prayer, Jesus is not saying here that it’s wrong for us to pray together in church. That’s a major characteristic of Jesus’ followers in the Book of Acts. They pray together. But we do need to watch our hearts and make sure we are not making a show of our prayer. If we feel the temptation towards elegant words, or passionate pleas, or spiritual depth in our prayers; if we are thinking about what other people think when we pray, then we ought to stop and reflect on our motives for prayer. On the other hand, we don’t want to overthink it. God’s people pray together. It’s not about me. It’s about God. It’s good to pray.

And whether or not we pray outside of church says a lot about our prayer in church. Do I have a personal prayer relationship, alone in my own room, my own garden, my private place, where it is just me and God walking through the forest by the sea, somewhere private? That’s a characteristic Luke highlights in his Gospel. Jesus often went off somewhere by Himself to pray.

If I have a personal relationship with God, if I am aware of my dependence on God, if I value God, then I will talk to Him on my own, by myself, just me and God. Nobody needs to know, nobody needs to hear.

And so with fasting. Jesus does not forbid corporate days of fasting. The Day of Atonement may have included fasting from the beginning. That’s how the command to deny oneself, or afflict oneself, or humble oneself in Leviticus 23:27 was later understood by Jewish worshippers. Formal periods of fasting became more common in Scripture after the defeat and exile of Judah by Babylon. The Jews of Esther’s day fasted (Esther 4:3). Ezra proclaimed a fast (Ezra 8:21). Zechariah comments on several fasts after the rebuilding of the Temple had begun (Zechariah 8:19). In the New Testament, the elders of the church in Antioch were fasting together when the Holy Spirit led them to send out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2).

We also have a few examples of Old Testament believers choosing to fast as individuals during some significant life moment. David fasted after his sin of adultery and murder (2 Samuel

12:16). Daniel fasted for the completion of the exile (Daniel 9:3). Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights when he went up on the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments on stone tablets (Exodus 34:38).

And that one's significant for our context, since Jesus himself fasted forty days and forty nights in the wilderness before coming up on this mountain, to give this Sermon. Fasting is not commanded in the New Covenant. It's not even really emphasized in the New Covenant, but it is practiced by Jesus and by other New Covenant believers, and he says, "When you fast..."

As with giving and praying, fasting on our own, secretly, is a way that we focus on our personal relationship with God. No one else needs to know. Watch your heart. Jesus tells us to guard against temptation for praise by taking active steps. Clean up. Look fresh. Go about your day as normal. Your fast is between you and God. Keep it that way.

Even though spiritual practices provide an ongoing temptation of wanting to be seen and honored by men, we can recognize that temptation and we can choose to engage in the struggle to focus our spiritual practices on personal relationship with God. And just as each example of what we are not to do ended with a reward from men, each example of what we are to do ends with a reward from God.

- b. And again Jesus emphasizes the statement of reward by repeating the exact same words in each case.

"...and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you (4b)."

"...and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you (6b)."

"...and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you (17b)."

This promise has three clauses: your Father who sees, in secret, will reward you. I am going to hold off on the idea of reward for now. I want to spend some time developing that idea, so I will come back to it in our next lesson.

I'm focusing now on these two clauses, "your Father who sees you," and, "in secret." We've already recognized that there is a good sense to giving, praying, and fasting that is done corporately, and that some good works should be seen. The promise of reward here does not exclude the need for living faith in public, or living faith in a corporate community. The two should go together. The public spiritual life emphasized in chapter 5 must be integrated with the private spiritual life emphasized here in chapter 6.

If I am not giving, praying, fasting, reading my Bible, confessing sin, journaling, singing, listening, dancing, walking with God in secret then I have no private relationship with God. And my personal relationship with Him is limited to the motivation I get from other people. It's not always bad to be motivated by others. That can be a great motivation, that we can really worship when we come together corporately and feel that spiritual sincerity and enthusiasm from other people. It can help focus our mind and heart truly on God. But if I am motivated to be seen by other people, that is a problem. Or if I'm uncomfortable to talk with God on my own, that's a problem. But for all you relational extroverts who love meeting with God in the middle of a lot of people, it's not bad. It's great. And for all you task-oriented introverts who do great with God in silence, I want to refer you back to chapter 5 and the importance of loving people publicly. So we all have things we're better at, and things that are not so natural to us.

This is not an either-or situation. And there is something quite important about spending time privately just with God. When we meet God in private, we treat Him as a real person who we really want to spend time with. Meeting God in private, we emphasize the place of priority He has in our life. He is important. Meeting God in private, we seek to develop our love for Him by sharing with Him our deep dreams, and fears, and thoughts. Meeting God in private, we ask to see and to be seen. "And your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."



“The gospel says you are simultaneously more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, yet more loved and accepted than you ever dared hope.”<sup>2</sup>

This is where we begin to win the battle against hypocrisy. By struggling with God to see ourselves as he sees us, the good, the bad, the ugly, the beautiful, the “already,” the “becoming,” and the “will be.”

Daddy, daddy, daddy! Watch this! See me! To be seen by God and to see God. To know you are loved and accepted. You are not living up to a standard that you cannot meet. You are pursuing a vision of goodness that you will attain in glory. It starts now. Being seen. Being willing to be seen. Trying to see. This is a necessary part of our transformation so that we can live for God in public with integrity – not perfectly! With integrity and with the emotional strength of knowing that you are forgiven, you are loved, you are accepted, you are known. And you are beginning to see Him.

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is attributed to Keller in several slightly different variations. Here is a precise reference. “The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.” Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller. *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. Kindle Ed. (New York ,NY: Penguin Publishing Group, 2016) 48.