

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW



Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18

Showing Off

2/4/2024

Good morning. We are going to Matthew 6 today. We're going to read two passages, verses 1-8 and 16-18. We're skipping over 9 through 15 today, which is the Lord's Prayer and a verse about forgiveness, and we will focus in on those verses over the next two weeks.

But as soon as I read them you'll see why we grouped these passages together today:

Matthew 6:1–8

[1] “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...

And now verse 16:

Matthew 6:16-18 [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.

So verse 1 is the headline over this whole section:

Matthew 6:[1] “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.

And then Jesus gives three examples of how we might violate this principle in how we give to the needy (2-4), how we pray (5-8+ Lord’s prayer), and then how we fast in verses 16-18.

So let’s look at the headline verse.

Jesus says two things about how we do our deeds of righteousness: (1) beware of doing them in front of others because (2) we want to be rewarded by the Father.

So He says that we should beware of doing our righteousness to be seen by people.

OK, but didn't He just say we are *supposed to* do good deeds to be seen?

Matthew 5:16 “[16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

So in Matthew 5:16 we are to be seen doing good works.

But Matthew 6:1 seems to say the opposite. It seems to say, “This little light of mine, wouldn't wanna let it shine.” “Hide it under a bushel, YES!”

So do we want our good works to be seen or do we want to hide them? Jesus seems to say both things in the sermon on the mount.

If we do some neighborhood project to help our neighbor, do we tweet about it so that God can be glorified for how he works through his people? Or do we do it discreetly so we can be rewarded by our Father?

It's not a crazy question - everything bad that the church does gets major press, so don't we want to highlight the overwhelming amount of good done by Christians by drawing attention to our good works? Isn't that how we let our light shine?

So Jesus says to let them shine and to not let them shine - how do we obey?

One (thanks to John Stott for this), is to see that Jesus is speaking against different sins.¹

¹ Stott, John. The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Bible Speaks Today Series) (p. 138). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

Stott writes, “It is our human cowardice which made him say ‘let your light shine before others’, and our human vanity which made him tell us to beware of practicing our righteousness in front of others. A. B. Bruce sums it up well when he writes that we are to ‘show when tempted to hide’ and ‘hide when tempted to show’.”²

And this is a big help. We know the times we are tempted to hide our faith, to be ashamed of doing good in the name of Christ. And it’s usually good in those situations to show a bit more of the works, to be more bold and courageous.

We also know the times we are tempted to do good works to show off. To direct glory at ourselves, to wear our piety like a disguise and to pretend to be someone we are not. In those situations, it is good to do our good works in secret.

It certainly takes wisdom to apply both of these commands, but the key question to ask is, “Where is the glory going? Am I glorifying me, drawing attention to myself, garnering praise for myself (which shouldn’t be my motive) or am I glorifying the Father, drawing attention to Him, gaining fame and renown for Him (which I should do?) Who looks good if I show this good deed.

And Jesus says here that we should do our good works to glorify the Father to make sure our reward from doing good is not the praise of people, but the reward that the Father gives.

We can’t miss that throughout the sermon on the mount, Jesus promises us an incredible reward for obedience. I know that we are allergic around here to the prosperity gospel - to any kind of promise that if we do good, we are guaranteed health, wealth, or prosperity. That wasn’t true for Jesus - nobody

² Stott, John. The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Bible Speaks Today Series) (p. 138). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

did more good than Him and He got the cross. So we don't want to promise the wrong rewards for obedience, such as, "If you pray in secret, God guarantees that He will heal you." That isn't the guaranteed reward.

But there is a reward that we should be seeking in doing good. We should do it for the right reward.

And we don't think this way. If we're honest, we struggle to pray. And there are all kinds of helps for that - prayer books, journaling, praying with others to draw us out - all good!

But do we ever think, "Jesus says I'll get a reward for this, so I want to pray." Or, "I don't want to be generous, but Jesus promises to reward my giving. I don't want to fast, but there's something promised to me if I do."

And you are probably feeling uncomfortable with this way of talking. It feels almost slimy. We've taught our kids that if you find a wallet, you return it, not hoping for a reward, but because it's the right thing to do. Well what if they don't give us a reward? It doesn't matter! Do it anyways.

But here Jesus says, "Do the right thing - because there is a reward!"

If I find somebody's missing puppy, am I only going to return it because the poster said there's a \$500 reward? Am I going to keep somebody's puppy if there isn't a cash reward for me? We know the reward shouldn't motivate obedience.

But isn't Jesus motivating obedience with reward?

It's really a matter of *what* the reward is.

I should return the puppy whether there's a cash reward or not. But if there is no cash reward, it doesn't mean there's no reward. There's the joy of

loving a neighbor, of seeing a child's eyes light up, there's a good reward to seek in doing good.

To switch analogies - when a person gets married, hopefully He feels like there's something very good in it for him. There should be many good things about marrying his spouse that he should desire, and it is her - her devotion and companionship and love and romance, and more than all, a relationship that can make you more like Christ - those are all good things to desire in getting married.

But we know there are wrong rewards for marriage too. When we see the picture of a 25 year old bride and her new 90 year old husband, (you're judgmental, too), none of us think, "Amazing, she found her soulmate." We think "he's rich. She's in it for the money." That's the wrong reward for marriage. You shouldn't marry for the money.

If a man comes to the altar to be married and says, "There is nothing in this for me," we would say, "That's not exactly what you mean, right?" You should come to that altar expecting a good thing in your marriage, eager for that good marriage, thankful for that good marriage. There should be joy on that day!

And in the same way, we shouldn't serve Jesus in secret for the wrong reward (health, wealth, and prosperity.) But we should come knowing God is good, obedience to Him is good, and God rewards in all kinds of ways those who do good works.

In The Weight of Glory, CSL writes, "*We must not be troubled by unbelievers when they say that this promise of reward makes the Christian life a mercenary affair. There are different kinds of reward. There is the reward which has no natural connection with the things you do to earn it, and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he*

marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it.”

And if our hope in obeying the Lord is that he'll reward us with cash or fame, we are seeking the wrong reward. But if the reward is Him and whatever blessings He sees as best for us to know Him more and serve Him more, then it's right to do good for that reward.

There *is* something in it for us. No, it isn't the promise of health, wealth, and prosperity, but something far better.

In The Weight of Glory, Lewis said it like this: *“if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”*

There are staggering rewards promised for serving Jesus. And they should motivate us to serve Him more.

So Jesus applies this, first to giving to the needy:

Matthew 6:[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.

So verse 2, you have hypocrites giving.

And in each of these three sections, Jesus repeats a phrase - “don’t do what the hypocrites do.” Don’t give “as the hypocrites” (2), don’t pray “like the hypocrites” (verse 5), and don’t fast “like the hypocrites” (verse 13).

And a *hypocrites* in Greek was a stage actor. Someone who got up on a stage where they’d be seen, put on a mask, and pretended to be somebody that they are not. And when you go to a play or a movie you expect that those are actors. You don’t get mad at Tom Holland and say, “You were just pretending to be Spider man!” He’d say, “Of course I was, that’s what I do.”

But Christian disciplines and Christian piety are not supposed to be the things we do to pretend. They’re not supposed to be a mask we wear to pretend we are somebody we’re not, and they’re not supposed to be thing we use to gather glory for ourselves so that we can be praised by others.

Now Jesus doesn’t say not to do those things. He expects that we will do those things. But he says, with each of the three disciplines mentioned here, “don’t do it that way, do it this way.” Do it differently so that you’re not getting the glory.

There is such a temptation to use our Christian piety as one more tool in our image management campaign. We have this desire to be impressive, to have people think much of us, and if we get in Christian circles, giving generously, sacrificing, praying, speaking, preaching, can all be things that make us look good and help us manage an image.

But our Christianity is supposed to be real, not the costume. We should preach because we believe this and it’s good for others, not to be praised. We should pray when we pray with others to help lead them to the throne, not to have them think, “Wow, he really knows his stuff.”

Hypocrites seek the wrong reward: praise from other people. This is the ongoing motivation of the Pharisees in the Gospels, and the motivation of the religious Pharisees among us today: their religious piety is hypocritical and only done for praise from people.

John 12:42–43 [42] Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; [43] for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

So a good question to ask when we do our works of righteousness is, “Who am I trying to glorify?” Is it me, or God? Am I turning an act of true charity, giving to others, into an act of vanity, glorifying myself?

And a good test is, “Will I do this in secret? If nobody ever knows?” Because my Father knows and rewards.

But if **our secret self is nowhere near as pious as our public self**, we may be spiritual gold-diggers, who are doing the whole thing for the wrong reward, or spiritual performers, pretending to be someone we’re not.

So Jesus says that when you give,

Matthew 6:[3] But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing

What does it mean to not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing?

The right hand is usually the dominant hand, the one that does more of the work. And so if our right hand is giving a gift, he says, not only that we

shouldn't do this to be seen by other people, but in a sense we aren't even supposed to do it to be seen by ourselves.

In Matthew 25, Jesus will describe the day that the righteous are rewarded in glory, and he says:

Matthew 25:35–39 [35] For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, [36] I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'

Look how the righteous will answer:

Matthew 25:[37] Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? [38] And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? [39] And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' (ESV)

The righteous are unaware of the good they're doing.

Now of course we know what we're doing. But that knowledge can very easily become praise of self or self-righteousness.

If we say about somebody, "He's handsome, and he knows it," we are saying that his looks have affected him and become a source of his identity and glory. If we say, "She's really smart, just ask her," we know that her smarts have fed her ego.

And if your left hand knows what your right hand is doing, your generosity, your service, your good works, your religiosity, have affected your ego and produced self-righteousness.

Jesus says when you do good works, don't let it go to your head.

Don't become proud and self-righteous. And don't feel sorry for yourself when it goes unrewarded or when no good deed goes unpunished.

One way I can know I'm letting my left hand know what my right hand is doing is when I grumble about my service or sacrifice:

Nobody even says thank you. (Who do I want to thank me?)

I do so much more than everybody else and it goes unnoticed. (Am I doing it so they will notice me?)

I make all of these sacrifices and never get rewarded. (That's not true, unless you are seeking the wrong reward.)

Or, I am letting my left hand know what my right hand is doing when it feeds my sense of smug superiority:

"I can't be at a church with these people who aren't as devoted or righteous as I am."

"I don't see these people making the sacrifices I'm making"

"No other church does (this thing) as well as us - whether that thing is worship, teaching, discipleship, community." We roll our eyes at the deficiencies of others, and we can even do it corporately as a church and be really affected by how much, quote unquote, "better" we are than the other churches.

When I am affected by my sacrifice in a way that pads my ego, or feeds my discontent with others, I may be doing all the right things for all the wrong reasons and lose my reward.

Also, in all of these categories (giving, praying, and fasting), Jesus says, “When you do these things.” He just assumes that any follower of Jesus, of course, will give, pray, and fast. So these things should be part of our lives.

Jesus goes on and applies these principles to how we pray:

Matthew 6:5-8 [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

Jesus will unpack more what our prayer should be like in the Lord’s prayer that we’ll look at next week.

But notice that He is trying to set his people apart from two groups of people: the religious hypocrites in verse 5 and the Gentiles in verse 7.

Christians are to be distinct from the religious actors, and the pagans who don’t know who God is. And this distinction applies today:

We have received in the scriptures revelation about who God is. So we can’t live the way we lived before if we believe. The example here is that if you don’t know who God is - if you don’t know He’s omnipotent and knows all things and sees all things and hears all things, you might pray like a pagan who thinks if he chants the words enough he’ll be heard.

But the correction for that is not to be like a hypocrite who prays much more intelligible prayers to be seen by other people.

Christianity is distinct from paganism, and distinct from religious hypocrisy, or at least it should be.

So Jesus says, “When you pray, pray in secret. Because the reward should be the reward that comes from the Father.”

Now the church never interpreted this to mean that they shouldn’t pray together or in their gatherings. They did - they were devoted to prayer in the book of Acts, we have recorded words of some of their public prayers. So this must all be a matter of the heart:

It’s ok to be seen praying or to pray publicly.

It’s another thing to pray *to be* seen.

And again, the test is, do we pray in private? Are all of our prayers more public where we receive the reward of people thinking we’re pious? Or do we also have a private prayer life that nobody sees, because we believe that God rewards those who seek Him?

So Jesus applies these principles to giving, to praying, and now to fasting:

Matthew 6:16-18 [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.

Jesus says, “When you fast...” So the assumption is that fasting is a discipline that will be practiced by Christians.

And we fast for a few reasons. One is that it is an act of self-humbling (Psalm 35:13). Two is that we free up time for prayer (lunchtime becomes prayer time), and three, the hunger reminds us of the hunger we have for God and reminds us to pray. So fasting is a good and encouraged discipline.

Now to strike a balance, some Christians tend to be more morbid and they think disciplines like fasting that involve humbling ourselves and sacrifice should be the bulk of the Christian life. But in the Old Testament calendar that God set up, there were lots of feast days in the year, but only one fast day (the day of atonement.) So they were only required to fast one day a year, and they’d occasionally declare another national fast.

So we are never given a frequency for fasting, and shouldn’t feel like this should be all the time. But it should be in our lives.

And Jesus says that when we do fast, we shouldn’t draw attention to it. Because then the attention is the reward. So he says to fast privately.

The season of lent starts this year on February 14th. And the church calendar, that includes things like lent and advent, wasn’t given by God. It was a manmade invention with all the right intentions - to help us mark time by important things - the birth of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, the ascension of Jesus. But again, it isn’t required for Christians to observe that calendar. Some Christians do, some don’t, some have never heard of it.

And within that calendar, many Christians practice lent, essentially a 40 day fast where they give up something. And there are God-glorifying reasons to practice lent, and there are equally God glorifying reasons not to practice lent. So that’s not the issue.

But if you draw attention to how you're practicing lent, with instagram photos of the chocolate that you're not going to eat because #lent, you've received your reward - likes on your instagram post. If you want to use that church calendar to remind you to fast, go for it - and let your reward be that your Father sees in secret.

So the principle is: do your good in a way that doesn't give you glory and where your reward is only the reward from the Father. And Jesus applies it to giving, fasting, and praying. But these are just three examples of where this should apply: it certainly applies to all of our serving, sacrificing, religious observances, church-going, missionary work. It's fine to be seen doing those things, but not fine to do those things to be seen.

But our motives are nearly always mixed, aren't they?

I can park really far away from church because I want to leave a spot open for a new visitor. But it would also be nice if someone noticed my piety, right? I can give because I really believe in a project the church is doing, but it would also be nice to get my name on the building somewhere to acknowledge the gift.

Maybe we don't only sacrifice or pray because of the praise we get from people. But it's still mixed in there. But if we really want the real reward, how do we seek that? How do we drive out the self-righteousness and the pretense?

First, realize our motives are always mixed. If we wait for perfect motives to act, we won't act. Jesus expects true obedience, but knows we will need His grace for our imperfect obedience.

But how do we grow in this? How do we grow so that our motives become more pure. By looking to the cross continually and mainly.

The cross of Jesus exposes us.

The cross of Jesus pulls the mask off of all of us stage actors. We can put on a pretty good show and convince a lot of people that we're really pious

and really great. But when it came time to see what it would take for people like us to go to heaven, the perfect spotless son of God was tortured and killed for us. We deserved that death - not all the praise we get for being so holy. The crosses outed all of us as sinners in need of a Savior, not well-meaning people in need of some religious efforts to make us superior.

The cross of Jesus reminds us of our dependence on God. In our religious observances, we can convince people that we're pretty great on our own, better than others, really. But by going to the cross, Jesus showed that we needed that. We really didn't have our own holiness. We needed the holiness of the Son of God, and we needed a remedy for our sinfulness. So, from completely outside of ourselves, we were given the righteousness of God - because we couldn't produce it inside ourselves.

When we think I deserve better than I'm getting, because my left hand has been noticing all the sacrifices my right hand has been making, we can look at the cross and see what we truly deserve. And if I never get praise here for my sacrifices here, but I get eternal life and I don't get what I truly deserved, that's till a really great deal.

And it's only in continually being reminded of the cross that the self-righteousness and the desire for praise from people who wouldn't praise me at all if they knew me better can dissolve.

And the cross is a constant reminder that our religious solutions for our unrighteousness don't work. Our best efforts don't work.

In the old hymn, "I boast no more," Isaac Watts wrote:

*No more, my God, I boast no more
Of all the duties I have done;
I quit the hopes I held before,
To trust the merits of Thy Son*

...

*The best obedience of my hands
Dares not appear before Thy throne;
But faith can answer Thy demands,
By pleading what my Lord has done.*

When we enter into glory, it's not going to be because we gave and prayed and fasted enough. It's not going to be because of our righteous deeds. It will only be if our souls plead what the Lord has done for us.

And if we really believe that, it will strip us of our arrogance, it will take the self-righteousness out of our piety, and it will make us people who love God and neighbor well.

Prayer of Confession:

Adapted from a prayer entitled Boasting in the prayer book Streams of Mercy by Barbara Duid.

Father,

We confess before you the deep-seated pride that leads us to parade our good deeds before others, while at the same time hiding and denying our weakness and sin. We boast about our spiritual disciplines, our obedience, and our goodness as if any of these virtues came from ourselves. We exalt ourselves over others, mocking their weaknesses and failures, behind their backs and to their faces. Forgive us, Lord!

Jesus, thank you that you love us as we are and are not ashamed to be called our Brother. You took on the weakness of a human body and entered our broken world in order to live the life that we could not live. You humbly saw the needs of people around you, and you loved them in all of their sin and brokenness, serving them with compassion and a pure heart. Thank you that your perfect obedience is now credited to us, even though we still have selfish, proud hearts.

Holy Spirit, we cannot deliver ourselves from our pride. Help us to look to Jesus for our righteousness and salvation--he alone is our hope and refuge. Transform us, by your mercy and grace, into humble, authentic followers of Jesus who rely on Jesus alone for our righteousness and boast only in Him. Rescue us each day from the pit of our own self-sufficiency. May the words of our mouths and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer, until the day when our faith becomes sight and our souls are made whole. Amen.

Assurance:

Ephesians 2:8–9 [8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Questions for Sermon Discussion:

- 1) Discuss the contrast between Matthew 5:16 and Matthew 6:1. How can both of these commands be kept?
- 2) What is the reward from the Father that Jesus promises in Matthew 6:1-18?
- 3) Should we pray in public?
- 4) Why do we fast?
- 5) How can the cross drive some of our false motives for obedience away?