

## Exceeding Righteousness: Spiritual Theater

Matthew 6, one through 18. 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. 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. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 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. 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. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray then like this, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

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. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 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.

Let's pray together. Holy Spirit, we pray that you would come now and teach us from the word that you inspired. Lord, we pray that you would minister to our hearts.

Lord, that you would transform us from the inside out, and that you would make us hearers and doers. Lord, not hearers only, but those who delight in obeying our Father who is in heaven, who loves us and knows us and sees us and has called us to himself. And so, Lord, would your presence be among us, doing this work in us, we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. You may be seated.

Well, for many people in our lives, many people in our town and in this world, for many of them, the only testimony of Jesus they will ever be exposed to is the one that they see in your

life. They'll never read Matthew or Mark or Luke or John. They'll never come to a church.

They will never, you know, pursue these things on their own, but they will observe you. They will hear the words that you say. They will take stock of the actions that they see, the behavior that they see in your life.

They'll notice how you live, and this creates a problem. Because much of the time, the testimony that they hear in our words and the actions that they see in our lives don't align. And what do we call someone whose confession does not align with their conduct? I heard it.

You can say, yeah, hypocrites. Right? And what's the primary reason many people will never even give Jesus a chance? Because the church is filled with hypocrites. Is that true? Let's see.

Let's look into God's Word and see what's going on here. This is a massive stain on the church and a stumbling block to the mission that God has given us. The fact that confession, our Christian confession, and our conduct don't necessarily align.

But what is more heartbreaking is that the name of Jesus is profaned throughout the world because many who claim allegiance to the kingdom of heaven are living lives that look like hell. And that stops people not only from coming to church, not only from acknowledging that the teaching of Jesus is good or that Jesus just might possibly be Lord, but it actually causes slander. People blaspheme God, the scriptures say, because of the sins of his people.

And so right here, immediately after instructing his disciples on a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus warns his disciples that their temptation toward hypocrisy will also exceed the temptation that the scribes and the Pharisees faced in their lesser righteousness. And so today we call someone a hypocrite when they preach one thing and practice the opposite. When they say, hey, don't do that thing.

And then they secretly, this is me being secretive. They, I don't know why I just did that prancing. Can we, can we run that back? Can we do that again? They secretly go and do the very thing that they told people not to do.

That's what the word hypocrite has come to mean. But in Jesus context, the word hypocrite actually comes from the world of theater. A hypocrite was an actor.

A hypocrite was a pretender. A hypocrite was someone who played a part. They were wearing a mask.

And so when Jesus uses the word, he's not primarily referring to someone who teaches God's law and then secretly breaks God's law. He isn't talking about people who use the right words, but perform the wrong actions. Rather, he's talking about people who are doing all of the right things with the wrong motives.

A hypocrite, according to Jesus, is someone who does the right things with wrong motives. They

look super spiritual, but it's just a mask that they wear. And then Jesus makes this concrete.

He connects this hypocrisy with three core spiritual practices of generosity, prayer, and fasting. Okay. These are not fringe activities.

These were not understood as just optional things that those who wanted to be super spiritual could do if they felt like it. These were expected of the community who's trying to be observant, trying to obey God's law. They're not optional.

They were the standard religious practices of faithful Jewish people in the first century. And the reason why these were standard is pretty clear in the scriptures. Generosity was a value first and foremost because Israel understood themselves to be one family.

It was the descendants of 12 brothers who were brought out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. And so in the ancient culture, to take care of your family was a huge priority. For someone in your family to suffer need and for the other people in the family not to care for that need was an incredible shame upon the family.

And so part of the reason why generosity was so valuable, so important to the communities, because they saw one another as family and saw their needs as their responsibility to meet. Additionally, it was a value because God continually communicates his heart for the poor throughout the scriptures. God so closely even he even identifies himself with the poor so that what you do for the poor you are doing for God.

Proverbs 19.17 says, whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord. If you are giving to the poor you are actually giving to God, he says. God identifies himself with the poor.

Jesus will carry this further in Matthew 25 and he teaches that whatever we do or do not do for the least of these, for those who are in need, we either we do or do not do for Jesus himself. They said, when do we see you hungry and thirsty and naked in prison? And Jesus says, whatever you did not do for the least of these, those the poor among you, you did not do for me. And so Jesus affirms that living generously is a good thing.

Prayer also is a priority throughout the scriptures. Prayer is simply conversation with God and it is our primary means for communion with God. It's how we don't just know about God but it's how we actually know God and know his heart and spend time with him is through prayer.

Think about this, you can you can read a book even an autobiography right and know a lot about someone but until you actually sit down across a table from someone and ask them questions about their lives and experience time with them, you don't actually know the person. And so likewise we can read our bibles and know a lot about God but until we actually take what we know about God, turn that into to prayer, commune with him, talk with him, invite him to speak into our lives, we might know a lot about him but we're not experiencing a relationship with him. And so prayer is essential for a relationship with God.

And then third he notes fasting. Fasting is super hip and popular right now. I mean I'm tempted to like how many of you are currently practicing intermittent fasting? Don't raise your hand but I'm sure people do this.

It's super popular right now for weight loss and resetting your gut biome, all of that. You've seen the for fitness reasons but fasting was a big deal in the ancient world for spiritual reasons. It's intentionally abstaining from food so that when hunger pains strike, you're reminded that what you really need is not bread but the presence and power of God in your life.

It cultivates this desperation and this hunger for God's presence and for God's power. So it's a reminder of our need for God that it's better to go hungry in the presence of the Lord than to be satisfied apart from him. These were common practices that all Torah observant people were expected to participate in and here's the thing.

From our text it is clear that not only does Jesus not disagree with these practices or disagree that his people participate in these practices but Jesus actually expects your participation. Jesus expects your participation in giving generously, in praying persistently, and in fasting regularly. Jesus expects your participation because he does not say if you give, if you pray, if you fast.

He says when. It's not if, it's when. Jesus expects that his people will be people of generosity, people of prayer, and people who diligently pursue his presence through fasting and sacrifice and service.

And we see these things at center stage in the New Testament. These were foundational practices not just for the Torah observant Jewish person but these were foundational practices in the life of believers in the early church. Compare that now with how most people today are are discipled.

How most people today, if a new believer comes to Jesus for the first time, they put their faith in Jesus and they come to their friend, their Christian friend, they're like what do I do now? It's like read your Bible, go to church, you know, learn to pray. Like prayer is a part of that. Maybe serve but, you know, but don't, not too quickly.

Like only if you feel like it, only if you're like ready to do that, you know, then you can start kind of investing in the lives of those around you, right? These are the foundational things and then we look to giving and prayer and fasting kind of as like if these are regular practices in your life, man, that is like graduate level Christianity. Like if you're giving and you're like if you're giving 10%, dang man, like Christian special forces, you know, like that's baseline in the New Testament. That's the starting point, okay, is yes, you're giving, you're praying, you're fasting, you're serving, you're seeking God, you're in community.

Yeah, you're worshiping, you're attending. Acts 2 42, they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching to the breaking of bread and the fellowship and the prayers and all came upon everyone as God was adding to their number day by day. Those who are being saved, they were

devoted to these things.

They're devoted to these things. These were entry level practices. Now, I'm going to get super nerdy on you guys for a second because I, just because I like this, so you're going to have to bear with me.

There is an ancient discipleship manual, the oldest recorded Christian training manual known to the world today is called the Didache. It just means that it's the teaching of the apostles. The Didache was written somewhere between 80 and 100 AD, right? The generation immediately after the disciples.

Some people even think that John, the apostle John was still alive when this was written. And the way it's written is that every chapter is like a new stage of discipleship in the life of a believer. This is what chapter one says, okay? It's a little bit lengthy, but I want us to feel the weight.

This is what chapter one says. This is what Christians in the first century were taught right when they came to faith in Jesus. Not later, very beginning.

There are two ways, one of life and one of death, but there's a great difference between these two ways. Now, the way of life is this. First, you shall love God who made you.

Secondly, your neighbor is yourself, and all things whatsoever you would not want done to you, neither do them to another. Now, the teaching of these two words of the Lord is this. Bless those who curse you, pray for your enemies, and fast for those who persecute you.

For what thanks do you have if you love those who love you? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? But you love those who hate you, and you shall not have an enemy. Give to everyone that asks you, and don't ask for repayment. For the Father wills that from our own blessings we should give to all.

Blessed is he who gives according to the commandment, for he is guiltless. Woe to him who receives, for if anyone receives having need, he shall be guiltless. But he that has not need shall give account why he received, and for what purpose, and coming into distress, he shall be strictly examined concerning his deeds, and he shall not come out until he has paid the last farthing.

But concerning this also it has been said, let your alms drop like sweat into your hands until you know to whom you should give them. This was not advanced teaching. This is welcome to Jesus.

This is discipleship 101. Loving your enemies, praying for your enemies, fasting for your enemies, giving to everyone, and if you don't have need and yet you receive, trouble. Let your alms, your offering, sweat into your hands like drops of sweat until you know who to whom you should give them.

This is entry level Christianity. And I think that one of the primary reasons that our growth as Christians is often stunted today is because we have tried to learn to run before we learn to walk. I think one of the reasons discipleship is often stunted today is because we have neglected practices that Jesus affirms are essential.

We start going to church and we read our Bibles and therefore we learn that the life of faith is about presence in church and knowledge about God, which are not bad. But then when we're taught to give or serve or live sacrificially in any way, it feels abrasive. We're surprised by it.

It makes us uncomfortable. And then we have to go back and have to re-learn generosity. We have to re-learn service.

We have to re-learn prayer. We have to re-learn conversation with God when we should have learned it, when faith was just beginning to bloom to set that trajectory for a lifetime of following Jesus. And so when we're uncomfortable and when we're called to these things later on in our discipleship, we often make excuses and justify our lack of participation saying, well, I'm not saved by these things.

These things don't save me. I'm not justified by my spiritual practices. But listen, Jesus isn't saying that you're saved by them.

The word of God says that Jesus expects that someone who is saved will pursue them. He doesn't say if you do these things. He says when you do these things.

He expects our participation. But in our participation, he warns that we can pursue these good practices for wrong reasons. We can pursue these good practices for the wrong reasons.

And I want to give us three false motives from this text that we as disciples of Jesus must be aware of. Now, check this out. We are in a world full of warnings.

There are warnings everywhere from the products that you buy to the entertainment you consume, the pharmaceutical commercials with warnings of side effects that are worse than the disease. Every restaurant you walk into has warning Proposition 65. Something in this restaurant could destroy you.

And it's never stopped us from eating there. There's warnings everywhere. We expect them.

They're white noise. We don't listen to them. But when Jesus says, beware, let's be mindful that Jesus knows what he's talking about and he wants to protect us from something destructive.

Jesus says, beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen. This first false motive is performing for applause from others. Now, some of us who have been a part of this church for the last several weeks while we've been going through the Sermon on the Mount, you might remember that early on in chapter five, Jesus says that you are salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world and that people would see your good deeds and give glory to your father who is in heaven. And so there's some tension there. That's a little bit confusing.

Jesus, what do you want for us? Do you want our deeds to be seen or do you want our deeds to be unseen? Feels like a little bit of a contradiction. What is it, Jesus? But notice the problem isn't the visibility. The problem is the false motive.

He says, beware of performing your righteous deeds before other people in order to be seen by them. In one sense, our good deeds, they're just going to happen. They're going to be in public because your life is lived in public and you are a transformed person.

You're a new creation. If you have put your faith in Jesus, you are going to live differently and that's going to be observable. The problem is when we say, oh, hey, I'm going to do this thing now in public in order to be observed, right? And we think to ourselves that, man, we would never do such a thing.

I'm telling you, I did this two weeks ago and I was completely shocked by it when I got attention, when I became aware of it, rather. There's a one day a month, all of the pastors in town get together for prayer. I don't know if you knew this.

It's actually a really awesome thing that we get together, celebrate Jesus together, celebrate that our unity in Christ is far greater than anything, any walls, any location, anything that divides us. And so we get together for prayer and we rotate who's hosting that. And it was our turn to host.

And it's on Thursdays and we have a small office and there's a women's Bible study going on on Thursdays. And so I was like, hey, let's meet at Linden Square. One, because it'd be a nice place to pray.

And two, I think it would be really cool for the community to see the unity that we have in prayer. I didn't think anything of it. And then on my way there, I'm thinking through this text and I'm like, oh my gosh, like something so small.

The community doesn't need to see our unity to be blessed by it. Is it a bad thing to do that in public? No. Is it a bad thing to read your Bible in public? No.

Why are you doing it? If you're doing it to be seen, it's a problem. In that moment, I was like, I hate myself. Just completely unaware.

It happens so easily. It happens so subtly. And so Jesus says, beware of doing it in order to be seen by others.

And so these disciplines that he gives here, this generosity and prayer and fasting, they were meant to cultivate a love for God and a love for others. They were meant to cultivate dependence and intimacy and humility. But in Jesus' day, people began using them to draw

attention to themselves.

And so generosity became a way to advance one's own honor and status. Rather than giving to relieve the suffering of the poor, people gave to elevate their own status, even at the expense of the poor. They were using the poor to boost themselves.

Prayer was so important in this culture that there were three calls to prayer a day. One at 9 a.m., one at 3 p.m., and one at sunset. And so wherever you were, when the call to prayer rang out, you were supposed to drop everything that you were doing and pray.

And so the Pharisees and the people that Jesus is talking about in this text, they started to get very strategic. They'd be like, well, I mean, the call to prayer is happening in 15 minutes. That's just enough time to get to the marketplace where all the people are so that they can see me and hear me and know how spiritual and how holy I am because of the words that I use when I pray.

And so they would go to the most crowded places and seek attention for themselves. Rather than seeking communion with God, they used this beautiful thing, this call to prayer as an opportunity to curate their own image. Even fasting became a way for people to seek attention for themselves.

The Pharisees, they fasted twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And those who wanted to be seen as spiritual would walk around all disheveled with these miserable looks on their faces. Oh, I'm so hungry.

In order so people would see them and go like, so spiritual, so hungry, so loved by God. And they would do this in order to be seen. Rather than fasting to humble themselves, they used it to exalt themselves.

And Jesus says they have received their reward. What they want is the applause from other people. And what they got is the applause from other people and nothing more.

They have received their reward, but it stops there. And so we need to ask, what is the reward that we desire? Do we want praise from people or do we want to please God? Jesus says if you give in order to be seen, you have your reward. If you pray in order to be heard, you have your reward.

If you fast to be noticed, you have your reward. The applause is what you get. The reputation is what you get.

But you forfeit intimacy with God. You forfeit the intimacy that these practices are designed to cultivate. That's the first false motive.

Performing for the applause from others. But there's another one. There's another false motive that we may fall prey to.

And this second trap is a little more subtle. It's performing for approval from God. Not to impress others, but to secure God's favor.

To accumulate for yourself spiritual brownie points. But notice what Jesus says. He says, your father who sees in secret.

He doesn't say your evaluator, your employer, even your king. He says your father. Some of you grew up believing that you had to earn your dad's attention, your dad's affection.

You had to make yourself worthy of his love all the time. And listen to what Jesus says about God's attentiveness to you. He says he sees you.

He knows where you are. He knows what you need before you ever ask him. You are his.

You don't do these things to get his attention. You do them because you know you have his attention. The only confidence we have in prayer is to know that God's listening.

We don't need to use many words to get his attention or use big flowery words in order to get his attention. We can simply share our hearts and know that he loves us and that he hears us. We don't need to give to be generous in order to get God's attention.

Giving to God and patting yourself on the back for it is like a parent giving their child 20 dollars to buy themselves a Christmas present and they spend 50 cents on it. And they're like, look what I did for you. God has given us everything.

And he gives to us so that we would be resourced to live like him. To be generous as God is generous. And so these spiritual practices are not about convincing a reluctant God to be mindful of us.

They are about communing with our father in heaven who is mindful of us. You have his attention. Not because you've done anything right, but because of what Christ has done for you.

The third trap might be the most hidden, which is performing for our own assurance. Some are tempted to perform for the applause from others. Some to perform for the approval of God.

Many people are tempted to perform spiritual practices for our own assurance. To reassure ourselves that we're okay. To reassure ourselves that we're doing just fine.

When we're reading our Bibles and when we're praying and when we're consistent in church and then when we're giving. When fear and doubt strike, we go, no, no, no, I'm doing all of the things. I'm doing all of the things, so I'm good.

Those things are good, but the problem is when we begin to slip. When we get to the latter chapters of Exodus in our Bible in a year plan, we come to Leviticus and we start to slip from our reading plans, our disciplines, our church attendance, whatever it is, and we start to panic.

And we start to doubt.

We start to have, am I even still saved? We start to, not necessarily everybody, but if you recognize that in yourself where you're not as consistent in your spiritual practices and you start to wonder, what is your standing before God? And then we get back to work. We go back to church and read our Bible and pray and we give and we fast and we check all the boxes just to make sure that we're good. But listen, your practices are the wrong place to look for assurance.

Because if your practices could ever give you assurance of your salvation, that is saying that your practices can actually save you. Our practices, the things that we do, our activities in life, our lives in general are a terrible place to look for assurance. If you're looking to your own performance for assurance, you're already dead in the water.

Because Jesus in the previous passage just called us, he said, be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect. And so bar infinitely high, wherever you are on the scale between perfection and nothingness or whatever, you're somewhere in between those. So even looking to your practices at all, you're already dead in the water.

You can't have enough good practices in your life to assure anyone of your salvation. You're not saved because you give. You're not saved because you pray.

You're not saved because you fast. You're not saved because you serve. Listen, you are not even saved because you love God.

You are saved because God loves you. You are saved because you've put your faith in the one and only son of God who was sent by the God who so loved you so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life. If we look to ourselves at all for assurance, we will always come up lacking.

And so if you want assurance in your salvation, don't look to yourself. Don't compare yourself with God's standard or anyone else's standard. Look to Jesus.

Look to the cross. Look to the one who fulfilled all righteousness, was the only one who deserved life, deserved intimacy with the father, and then willingly sacrificed his life, gave it all away so that you through faith could be brought into intimacy with God. Don't look at yourself.

Don't look at anyone else. Look to Jesus. Amen? If you want assurance, look to the cross and ask yourself, do I believe that man on the cross is God and that his death invites me, atones for my sin, and invites me into intimacy with the father? If your answer to that question is yes, that's all the assurance that you need.

We are saved by grace through faith, not according to our works so that no one may boast. You are saved because God loves you. He sent his son for you.

His death atones for your sins, and he has given you his spirit to transform you and empower you to live a life that pleases him. And so this is the problem, this whole thing, this is the problem at its core. These very practices meant to glorify God can become strategies to glorify ourselves.

And so Jesus says that his disciples, if they're going to be strategic about anything in their disciplines, they need to be strategic to hide them. They need to be strategic to do these things secretly. He says, when you give, don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing, which is kind of a funny statement and hyperbolic in a way, but this is the way I've always understood that.

I've played baseball my whole life, and I know there's some baseball players in here, and so I can throw a ball with my right hand without even thinking about it. I don't have to think through the process at all to throw a ball with my dominant hand. Try to get me to throw a ball with my left hand, and I have to like, okay, this foot forward, and you know, it's super awkward.

I have to think about it, and it's obvious. And so for me, the helpful illustration is not letting your right hand know what your left hand is doing, or not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing, is let giving, let generosity be so natural that you're not even aware of it when it's happening. You're such a giving, generous person that when someone draws attention to it, you're like, wait, what? No, that's just, no, that's just what we do, right? To let it just be so natural that you don't have to pay attention to it.

The same goes for prayer. If you're going to be strategic about where you are during the call to prayer, make sure you look at your watch. You got, I got 15 minutes.

I need to get home to the innermost room in my house where there are no windows, and close the door. Be intentional about being alone with God. When you're fasting, Jesus says, clean yourself up, wash your face, do your hair, make it look like you're going to a banquet in order to fast.

Jesus says that in the secrecy of our righteousness, we will receive a greater reward than what the world can give us. And so I just want to ask, as we prepare to wrap up our time, what is that reward? This word reward is our wages. It's what is earned, right? You cultivate a garden, your reward is fruit.

You go to work, your reward, your wages are a paycheck. And so to answer that question, what is the reward available to us in secret generosity, prayer, and fasting? We need to ask, what is naturally cultivated by these practices? What is the natural fruit of generosity, prayer, and fasting? The answer is that all of these practices flow from and cultivate dependence. All of these practices cultivate a desperate dependence.

Giving trains us to depend on God for everything that we need. Prayer trains us to ask God for everything we need. Fasting trains us to remember that God is all that we need.

All of these practices lead us in a humble, desperate dependence. But why on earth would any of us want to be desperately dependent? How on earth is that a reward? Okay, I mean, I can at least have applause over here. I can at least have praise from people over here.

But if I do these things in secret, then all I'm left with is need. What is the reward of desperate dependence? We hate feeling needy. Desperate dependence though is a reward because God loves to satisfy our desperation when what we are desperate for is Him.

God is the reward. Intimacy with our Father is the reward. The one who sees in secret, the one who is already there, the one who sees you and knows you and loves you, He is the reward.

Intimacy with God is the reward. God is the gift. And so these practices clear out the clutter of false loves.

All of the things that we desire that compete with our attention, that compete with our loyalty, that compete with our affection. These practices clear those things out and they empty the heart of false rewards. They create space for the presence of God and for His power to be experienced.

And so here's the invitation. Many people will hear this passage and go, well, my heart's not in it, so I'm not going to do it. I don't want to be a hypocrite and give for a claim or pray and have somebody hear me or do any of my practices.

I don't want to be a hypocrite, so if my heart's not in it, I'm not going to do it. That's not what Jesus says. Jesus doesn't say the proper response to wrong motives is wrong actions.

He says the proper response to wrong motives is repentance. To do the good thing and ask for God to change your heart. Don't avoid these practices because you think that they're for the spiritual elites or that you are somehow unworthy of these.

Do them, but do them before an audience of one. Do them before the Lord and Him alone. Because the Father who sees in secret is not waiting to shame you.

He's inviting you into time with Himself, into space with Himself. And if you've put your faith in Christ, then you are already His. And so give and pray and fast and read your Bibles and serve and love people as God has loved you.

Pour out your life, your time, your resources, your affections. Pour them out before God. Serve and invest in others not to be seen, not to earn, not to prove, but because God is your Father.

That He is your treasure and that Christ Himself is your reward. Amen? Amen. Let's pray together.

Father, we pray that now You would pour out Your Spirit to make us not only hearers of these words, but doers. Lord, make us obedient to not just Your commands, God, but make us obedient to Your heart. Lord, make us to know Your desires for us and for this world.

And then, Lord, would You by Your Spirit, God, pour us out for Your people. Pour us out for the lost. Pour us out for carpentry of the coastlands and the nations.

Lord, we need You to do this work in us. And so we invite You to do that now as we respond in Jesus' name. Amen.