

Matthew 6

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Date: 29 April 2018

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[0 : 00] So I think we're very much aware, aren't we, today, of privacy, of confidentiality in certain circumstances.

! You've got a friend who is divulging to you a very personal problem or difficulty.! What will you do with that? They say please keep this in confidence.

So don't you? Sometimes even without them saying, I'm saying this in confidence, that they don't want it talked about publicly. They don't want you to go home and put it on Facebook. They don't want you to tell your family or your friends.

They expect, don't they, a measure of confidentiality and secrecy. And Jesus is telling us about the Christian life and he's saying there is a place for secrecy.

And now we've looked through Matthew chapter 5 and we've seen this demands of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 08] The righteousness that he wants you and I as his followers and his disciples to live out. We've come through, haven't we, verses 15 to 48, and we've seen Jesus correcting the teaching of the rabbis and the religious leaders of his day.

And he's shown us what the Old Testament really means and what it should have meant to them. We've seen that he places a demand that Jesus' followers will be stringent.

They will follow closely his teaching. There is a stringent righteousness. It's not just that we keep the commandment on the outward level. It's not just that we've not murdered anyone this morning. But actually, the law of God goes beneath the surface and so it addresses our motives. And the feelings that give rise to that outward act. So we know, maybe we're not guilty of murder, but we know unjustified anger is a big issue.

The resentment that can seize within. It's not just the outward act of adultery. It's not just about not going all the way.

[2 : 15] But what about our lusts and our desires that no one ever sees? It's not just about being a truthful witness. But I'm actually being true on the outside.

And our words and our actions reflecting our yes and our no. And we realise, if you study Matthew 5 at all, that Jesus goes deep, deep, deep.

And he demands a stringent righteousness. Far from loosening the Old Testament law. Far from demanding less, Jesus is rigorous with us.

And he demands a stringent righteousness. But as we come into chapter 6, we see Jesus demanding a secret righteousness. One that doesn't seek to display itself.

One that doesn't win points from people. He says, for my followers, there must be an element of secrecy about the Christian life.

[3 : 16] That's what he's talking about in the passage. The main point is really, really clear. It's in verse 1. In verse 1, he says, beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.

That's the main point. And then he gives you three illustrations of that situation. He says in verse 2, so when you give to the needy. And then in verse 5, and when you pray.

And in verse 16, when you fast. Now those of you who have been here for the last number of weeks will think, isn't Jesus contradicting himself in verse 1?

Look back to chapter 5 and verse 16. Where Jesus said, in the same way, let your light shine before others. So that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

He said that, didn't he? He said, do your good works in front of others. But that doesn't contradict this. You'll notice in chapter 6 and verse 1, he says, be careful of doing your righteousness, practicing your righteousness before other people.

[4 : 31] There's nothing wrong with doing it before other people. There's nothing wrong with living out a public Christian life. There's nothing wrong with men and women, your colleagues, your neighbours, your families, seeing your good works in order that they give praise to your Father in heaven.

That's what Jesus said in chapter 5, verse 16. Let them see how you live and show that that points to someone greater, to a Father in heaven. But here in chapter 6, verse 1, he's telling us that you don't need to be overcome by pride.

Don't do your righteous acts before other people in order to be seen by them. And impress them with how righteous you seem to be.

So Jesus here is getting on our pride, isn't he? And so here's our concern, four things. Jesus would point out to us the balance that you must keep. Jesus would point out to us the balance that we must keep.

So as you look at the examples that Jesus gives in verse 2, verse 5, and verse 16, they have to do with giving to the needy, and prayer, and fasting.

[5 : 46] And you might say, if there's such a danger of hypocrisy, if the danger of showing off, this danger of showmanship is here, and it's so prevalent in these acts of righteousness and devotion, well I'll just back off from them.

I won't do them. I'll solve them that way. And that is not what Jesus is saying. That could be our reaction, but Jesus doesn't want us to go off balance.

It would be like us saying, wouldn't it, I know that there are some people who really overeat. And they are gluttons. And therefore I won't eat. When you get over that quickly.

And dishes seem to get broken. Far more often when you're washing dishes. And therefore I just will give up washing dishes. And again, you'd get over that quickly, wouldn't you?

It's really important that you see that the abuse of an activity does not mean that it's improper. The abuse, or the fact that something can be abused, an activity can be abused, does not mean that it's improper.

[6 : 53] It just means that it needs to be used and done in a proper way. So we can't use this as a cop-out. Or something like this for our own selfishness.

So I don't need to give to the needy, or I don't need to pray, or I don't need to fast. That is not what Jesus is saying. He's saying there's a balance that you keep. And Jesus assumes, doesn't he, that you will do these things.

In verse 2, he says, when you give to the needy. In verse 5 he says, when you pray. And then in verse 16 he says, when you fast.

Jesus is not saying, if you give to the needy, if you pray, and if you fast. He's saying when. When you do it. Jesus assumes that if you are a disciple of his, you will give to the needy.

You will be generous. And if you are his disciples, you will engage in prayer. And if you are his disciple, you will fast. He assumes as much.

[7 : 58] And so there's a balance that you must keep. And so often, as is the case, is that in the Christian life, you need this tension. And this balance. That the Holy Spirit will enable you to keep in the way that you live your life.

Now secondly, Jesus shows us the scrutiny we must face. The scrutiny we must face. Look at verse 1. Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.

Why does he say that? Why does he say that? Well, he would only say that if he knew that you and I will have this tendency to win.

To try to win favor from people. And if we have this tendency that we want to impress people with doing these acts of piety. Whether it's my praying or my fasting or my giving or really any other act of Christian devotion.

He knows that in his followers hearts is a tendency to impress men and women. And therefore to win their favor and to try and gain points from them.

[9 : 12] And make them think, wow, he's really spiritual isn't he? Or she's really spiritual. He seems to know you and I. Don't do those things before others in order to be seen by them.

And Jesus is still on the point, isn't he, of chapter 5. He still wants a deep righteousness. Like he wanted there. He's not just concerned with what we do, but he's concerned with why we do it.

And when I turn that question upon my Christian acts. It opens up a whole new angle for me. Jesus is so thorough, isn't he?

So for instance in verses 2 and 3. When you give to the needy, you don't blow a trumpet like the hypocrites do in the synagogues. And in the streets.

And in the streets. We're not really sure what that meant. Some people think that the kind of shape of the offering box in the temple was the shape of a trumpet. I don't know whether he meant this literally or not.

[10:14] We don't know. Jesus may have been using, isn't it, that figurative expression which says we don't blow our own trumpet. But you don't show off your generosity so that other people notice it.

In fact, Jesus goes as far to say in verse 3 that when you're giving to the needy, can you see that? Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. That is, don't be self-conscious about it. Even if other people don't notice, it's liable isn't it? We'll want to keep our own record. That I've done this. And I've done that.

And I've been generous. Don't even keep a record. Just forget about it. Don't try to chalk up points in your own estimation.

Let it go. Don't even ponder it. And that is sort of disappointing. What's the point in being generous?

[11:18] What's the point of praying? What's the point of going through the rigor of fasting if in fact no one's going to notice it? What is the use of giving if all it's going to do is meet someone else's need?

What's the use of praying if it's only going to involve communion with my Father? What's the use of fasting if it's only going to be a time when I receive God's special help in a different team?

And no one's going to know about it. Won't it be wasted? And Jesus says no. No it won't be wasted. You don't do that. He says if you do it for those reasons.

If you do it for others. Well you'll be successful. He says in each case doesn't he? You will have your reward. So the person who gives to be seen.

They have their reward. They have their reward. That is even means they get the praise and they get the applauded of men and women.

[12:23] Who notice them and think of them. They are really religious aren't they? They're really full on. They're impressive in their Christian discipleship. But that is all the reward they'll get.

You can do all these things and be very successful. You just have to know a few tips and a few tricks of the trade. And you can really impress the other Christians here this morning.

And so Jesus places us under this scrutiny. He knows us doesn't he? He knows your heart and my heart. And he says you must watch your motives.

In the act of devotion. Why are you doing it? To be seen by men? And so he probes us deeper.

And he exposes us to ourselves. So in the second world war in France. Food began to be short. And it began to take an effect on some of the population.

[13:24] And so for instance when somebody broke a bone. It wouldn't mend properly. Because of the lack in their diet. Or if somebody received a gash on their arm.

A big cut. It would take months to heal. Teeth would become discolored. And they would grow crooked. And in the end they would fall out.

And one of the things the Nazis did when they captured someone. Is they sometimes would yank open their mouths. And look in. Because if their teeth were white and sound.

They knew that they'd come in from outside the country. And they were likely a spy. Because you don't just go by outward appearance. You probe a little deeper. And you see signs of what is really the case.

And Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. He keeps probing you doesn't he? He says of all your Christian acts. And the things that you do. He says why are you doing them?

[14:25] Don't do them to be seen by men. It's in a different context. But Jesus' words in John 12.

Are so relevant aren't they? John chapter 12 verses 42 to 43. Let me read them to you.

Nevertheless many of the authorities. They believed in him.

But for the fear of the Pharisees. They did not confess it. So that they would not be put out of the synagogue. People didn't believe in Jesus. That they'd be kicked out of the synagogue. For the Pharisees.

They loved the glory. That comes from man. More than the glory. That comes from God. And that phrase jumps out of me.

Again and again and again. And it raises the question. Is it? What in the Christian life. Do I really crave? Is it too often.

[15 : 26] That I desire the praise. Of men and women. Rather than the praise of God. Why do you do these things? Why do you do.

What you do. Is it? Scrutinately Jesus puts us in there. Thirdly Jesus shows us. The secrecy we must practice.

And again you see that in verse 3. And verse 6. And verse 17. Verse 17. So for example in verse 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. You see. Jesus tells you.

There is this element of secrecy. To the Christian life. He doesn't mean that you don't ever let anyone know. That you are going to pray.

[16 : 23] Or that you give. Or that you fast. But I think you know what he means. He means doesn't he. Don't make a point trying to display it. Which you can do very very subtly.

Can't you? There is this element of secrecy. That is that. And why does he impress upon us. This element of secrecy. I think because secrecy.

Promotes sincerity. If someone does something privately. It's a pretty good idea. That it reveals. Who they genuinely are.

Imagine you. You go out for dinner. So you are married. And you go out for dinner. Some of those posh. Work business dinners.

As a married couple. And you are attending. The dinner. It's in that kind of awkward bit. When you arrive at a business thing. And everyone is just standing around. And joking.

[17 : 24] There is those little. Bits of food. On plates. Being brought around. And everybody is shaking hands. And doing pleasant things. And it's cold for dinner. And you are there. And you go to sit down.

To this great banquet. Make a great point. Of taking your wife's seat. And pulling it back. So that you help her to sit. It's very chivalrous.

What I want to know is. Do you do that when you are at home? Do you do that when you are at home? When you sit down for lunch. When she is having a sandwich. Let me take you to the last Easter.

Do you do that? Because it's what you are at home. Really shows your character. Doesn't it? What does he do that husband. When there is no one else to see? What does he do when the audience isn't there?

Isn't there? That is what will tell you. He is in a certain character or not. And so that is what is Jesus saying? Jesus saying. It's what you do in secret.

[18 : 21] When no one has got their eyes on you. That will reveal to you. How genuine your acts of worship are. And we have really very very subtle ways.

Of violating. This kind of secrecy. And sometimes we won't be aware of it. Sometimes we won't catch ourselves at it. Sometimes we do catch ourselves at it. And it's horrific.

So for example. You have this thing about fasting in verse 16. And following of what Jesus says. It was the practice of the Pharisees. In Jesus time to fast on a Monday or Thursday.

Monday and Thursday. Also had to be market days. And that meant there would be more people in town on those days. And that meant there would be more people to see. These very sad looking spiritual folks.

Who were so obviously engaging in fasting. And you see that. When he gives you these instances. It's very blatant. It's very public. Isn't it? And so on.

[19 : 26] And there are very very obvious examples. Some of these are chatting to me from the background. I don't know who it is. The. The. The.

The. Let me try and cite some examples. You will not disagree with them. You will not agree with them. Some of them. You will not agree with them. Because. They're probably a little bit close to the bone. Some of you will. I've had other issues with them.

And when I was at Cornhill. We took an Australian minister. I called Philip Jensen. For lunch. Philip Jensen is very blunt and brash. And we had lunch. Our lunch arrived. And Philip Jensen's there.

And my friend said to Philip Jensen. Would you lead us in prayer Philip? Would you say grace? And Philip Jensen said. Say it yourself you Pharisee. It's a great moment. Publicly in a restaurant.

What about a 24 hour prayer chart? It's a bit of all the rage isn't it? Students at the moment. We're going to have a 24 hour prayer chart. And now what we need to do is.

[20 : 23] And we're going to have someone praying for the whole 24 hours. And you need to sign up for a slot. 15 minutes or 30 minutes. Segment. And you put your name down to pray during that segment.

Why? Why do you have to put it on display? They're the real prayer warriors. That take the 3.30 in the morning.

To the 4 o'clock slot. Aren't they? Why don't we just make it a point to pray? Gets more subtle doesn't it? I've got a minister friend.

Who's always telling me. That while he was jogging. He was praying. I don't know what I'm more impressed with. Isn't that spiritual? We'd never admit it would we.

Do you see how subtle it can be? And so we must be very very careful. I spoke at a students meeting on Wednesday. It's very great.

[21 : 20] Afterwards a number of people were praying afterwards. But they managed to pray for one another. In the kind of place where the seats were. Kind of very dramatically. Eyes closed. Earnestly praying.

So we all had to walk around them. They had their reward. They had their reward. They had their reward. They had their reward. We can sing can't we? Well some of us do. But we can sing in a way. That shows we're very very earnest. We have the reward. We've got to be really careful haven't we?

Now and we need to realize. And we don't need to react. We don't need to react over and against this. Where we never tell anyone. Where we're praying for them.

I think it's good. I think the apostle Paul encourages us to tell people that we are going to pray for them. It is a great encouragement that another Christian cares enough about me to name my name to their father.

[22 : 24] There's nothing necessarily hypocritical about that. It's not done as a self kind of display. But we must be careful. We must be careful. And we must watch this.

Somebody said I woke up at 1.30 in the morning and I couldn't sleep. And I thought the Lord was telling me to pray. That he allowed me to wake up and pray. So I spent the time in prayer. And I prayed for my family.

And say great. Why have you told me? Why tell others? Unless you have a hidden agenda.

A secret agenda. For wanting other people to be impressed. And I don't say this as somebody who does a struggle with it. We may be talking about certain spiritual problems we face.

And certain struggles with sin that we have. Or something like that. And again we need to be careful that in those conversations where we're even talking about our struggles.

[23 : 31] That we're not doing it in order that someone else will receive the impression. Boy she's a really spiritual person. They really struggle over sin. Do you see how subtle and how sneaky this is?

And sometimes we can talk about our spiritual struggles because we want to impress other people. We have to be careful. Fourthly, Jesus points us to the passion that you must have.

The passion that you must have. Look at the end of verse 4. Look at the end of verse 6. And look at the end of verse 18. Let's just take it from verse 6. The example of prayer.

You see the problem we have with this phrase. To be seen by others. To be seen by others. And that problem of wanting others to see.

It is a bondage. It is a slavery. Some of us know that when we're desperately trying to impress someone. And we're wanting to win the praise or the commendation of others.

[24 : 35] We are in bondage to that. And you're doing these things to please them. And win their favour. And impressing them. And we're not actually doing it for them.

That they would be impressed. It's that it makes us feel good when we have their approval. It's very selfish. But there's a bondage isn't there to this. And it's really hard to break out of.

And I think that most of us, if not all of us, are very sensitive to this. And we have continuing struggles in this area. And it's a real battle isn't it?

You know when you're driving along a motorway. And they've changed the lanes a little bit temporarily for roadworks. And so you've got the white lines which you normally go by. But then you've got the little dots which show you the kind of change of route that you need to go in the lane. And it takes discipline at the start isn't it? To think right, I'm not going to go down the normal route of white lines in those lanes. I'm going to follow the dotted lines and go that way. And it takes discipline to do it.

[25 : 38] And we, it's really hard not to go down the lines of just wanting to please others and wanting to do things in front of others. And we have to work hard not to go in them.

And there's a sense in which we so love and care for what people think, even Christian people think. And wanting to win their approval.

It is a bondage that holds us. And so how do we go about getting free of this? And that is by having one ruling passion. Look at verse 6.

It says when you pray, you go into your room, you close the door, and you pray to your Father who is in the secret place. And your Father who sees in the secret place will reward you.

You focus on the only one thing that matters. Your Father. Your Father who sees in the secret place. Because he is all the audience that you need.

[26 : 45] Just the Father. Just the presence of the Father. And if your life is lived in the Father's presence, you don't need anything else.

And if you have the approval of your Father in heaven, you don't need the approval of anyone else. And so it doesn't matter whether people praise you, or see you.

That is your ruling passion. And that will then deliver us. When I preached for the first time in Cardiff, it was a bit of a disaster really.

I was only grateful that my friend had preached in the morning and he's even worse. When we left the room where we preached, my minister Andrew Bowden, I should get him to come one Sunday. He said to me, just before we left the little room where we prayed, he said, you preach to an audience of one. And that is a brilliant thing to remember, isn't it? Because, believe it or not, Sunday nights and Monday mornings, I feel all over the place.

[27 : 51] But it doesn't really matter, because I preach to an audience of one. And you live your life to an audience of one. Let me finish with this story. There was a man blinded in one of the world wars.

And he returned home to recover. And when he recovered, he was still blind. He was a rather accomplished musician. And so he would play the piano at the hospital after he recovered.

And he hoped that his playing of the piano would perhaps lift the spirits and at least alleviate the depression of some of the men around him who had been so wounded in battle.

Some of whom were recovering, some of whom would not recover. And so day after day, he would go in and he would play for some length of time at the piano. And he never knew whether his playing was effective.

Whether it was pleasing or whether it was helping anyone at all. He would hear people come and people go in the room, but he wouldn't know what was going on or what they were doing.

[28 : 54] And finally, one day after he'd finished playing and he took a brief rest, after he'd finished playing, he suddenly heard someone standing a few feet away clapping very loudly.

He turned his sightless eyes in the direction of the sound and he said, who are you? And the robust voice said, I am your king.

It was the king of England, King George, who was visiting the hospital to do what he could to cheer the wounded. And you see, that was all the approval the man needed.

Because if the king was happy with what he was doing, what else did he need? What further commendation would he require? And so if you have your father in heaven, who sees in the secret place, and if you can pray to your father in the secret place, the fact that you meet with him there, and the fact that he sees all, well that is all we should need.

Let's pray.